



**CRIS**  
Centre for Resilient  
and Inclusive Societies

**Submission by the Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies (CRIS)  
to the Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs References Committee  
Inquiry into Right-wing Extremist Movements in Australia**

**April 2024**

**This Submission has been prepared by members of The Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies (CRIS).** CRIS is a research and program-based think tank consortium of five Australian academic, community and industry partners – Deakin University, Western Sydney University, Victoria University, the Australian Multicultural Foundation (AMF), and the Centre for Multicultural Youth (CMY).

CRIS was established through a program grant from the State Government of Victoria to deliver research, programs and inform policies that advance and enrich our local, national, and international community cohesion and resilience. We work on a range of related issues including:

- Social polarisation and disengagement from the public sphere.
- The rise of social exclusivist identities based on ethnicity, religion, or culture.
- The influence of global conflicts and tensions on local environments and actors.
- The social harms created when grievances and alienation translate into violent extremist actions against specific groups or society at large.

For more information about CRIS and its activities, please see: <https://www.crisconsortium.org/>

**NB:** Because of the overlap in personnel between the Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies (CRIS) and the AVERT (Addressing Violent Extremism and Radicalisation to Terrorism) Research Network, both of which are administered through Deakin University's Alfred Deakin Institute, some portions of this submission contain the same or slightly modified sections across both submissions.

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**Introduction**

Before addressing the terms of reference directly, we offer broader observations on four key points:

- What do we mean by ‘right wing extremism’?
- The convergence of extremist ideologies into hybrid, mixed or fluid forms that challenge conventional ideological boundaries
- The relationship between declining trust and the rise of all forms of extremism, including far-right extremism

**A. What do we mean by ‘far-right extremism’?**

**A note on terminology**

There are a range of terms currently used in public settings to describe similar or identical movements that can be characterised as located on the political right, beyond what would be considered normative for mainstream conservative or political right views. These terms include both popular phrases such as ‘far right extremist’, ‘radical right’, ‘alt right’ and ‘right wing extremist’, and policy-based terms such as ‘ideologically motivated extremism’, as is now the case in Australia and Canada.

In this submission, we use the term ‘far-right extremism’ to denote those ideologies, narratives, groups and movements that go beyond mainstream right-wing conservative thinking and action. This term is broadly synonymous with what we understand the focus of the Inquiry’s Terms of Reference to be in relation to ‘right-wing extremism’.

**Defining far-right extremism**

While far-right extremist movements are highly heterogenous and fragmented, there are

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several core ideological markers that have been used in academia to define far-right extremism. Some researchers have defined the phenomenon as ‘a loose movement’ or cluster of movements ‘characterized by a racially, ethnically and sexually defined nationalism. This nationalism is often framed in terms of white power and is grounded in xenophobic and exclusionary understandings of the perceived threats posed by such groups as people of colour, Jews, immigrants, the LGBTQ community and feminists’.<sup>1</sup> Australian- and Victorian-specific research on far-right extremism has applied a similar conceptual framework.<sup>2</sup>

According to a recent analysis, Carter identifies six key attributes: ‘strong state or authoritarianism, nationalism, racism, xenophobia, anti-democracy, and populism or anti-establishment rhetoric.’<sup>3</sup> She further differentiates between defining and accompanying attributes, arguing that ‘authoritarianism, anti-democracy, and an exclusionary and/or a holistic kind of nationalism are defining properties of right-wing extremism/radicalism, [while] xenophobia, racism, and populism are accompanying characteristics of the concept’.<sup>4</sup> Anti-establishment and anti-democracy ideologies often manifest in high levels of distrust toward political institutions<sup>5</sup> and culminate in assertions of the illegitimacy of established governments or regimes of power.<sup>6</sup>

In policy contexts, Canada’s 2018 *Public Report on the Terrorist Threat in Canada* (updated in 2019 to include the terminology shift from ‘right-wing extremism’ to ‘ideologically motivated

<sup>1</sup> Perry, B. and Scrivens, R. (2015) *Right-wing Extremism in Canada: An Environmental Scan*. Kanishka Project Contribution Program, Public Safety Canada, 5.  
[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/307971749\\_Right\\_Wing\\_Extremism\\_in\\_Canada\\_An\\_Environmenta\\_l\\_Scan\\_2015/link/593aa39a0f7e9b3317f41358/download](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/307971749_Right_Wing_Extremism_in_Canada_An_Environmenta_l_Scan_2015/link/593aa39a0f7e9b3317f41358/download)

<sup>2</sup> Simmons, C., Farrell-Molloy, J., Davey, J. and Peucker, M. (2021) *Reciprocal Dynamics between Australia’s Political Fringes on Twitter*. Melbourne: Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies (CRIS).  
<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5d48cb4d61091100011eded9/t/622a6227b60f5d55ff4a4e76/1646944812531/Reciprocal+Dynamics+on+Twitter+V2.pdf>

Guerin, C., Davey, J., Peucker, M. and Fischer T. J. (2020) *The Interplay between Australia’s Political Fringes on the Right and Left: Online Messaging on Facebook*. Melbourne: Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies (CRIS).

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5d48cb4d61091100011eded9/t/6179e48a31fd1d183245f1f1/1635378349026/The+Interplay+Between+Australia%27s+Political+Fringes+Online+Messaging+on+Facebook.pdf>

Guerin, C., Peucker, M., Fisher T.J., Davey, J. (2021) *A Snapshot of Far-Right Activity on Gab in Australia*. Melbourne: Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies (CRIS).

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5d48cb4d61091100011eded9/t/6179e468b9e13b0d63d30714/1635378289244/A+Snapshot+of+Far+Right+Activity+on+GAB+in+Australia.pdf>

Peucker, M., Smith, D., Iqbal, M. (2018) *Mapping Network and Narratives of Far-Right Movements in Victoria. Report*. Melbourne: Victoria University.

Peucker, M., Spaaij, R., Smith, D., Patton S. (2020) *Dissenting Citizenship? Understanding vulnerabilities to right-wing extremism on the local level: a multilevel analysis of far-right manifestations, risk and protective factors in three local municipalities in Victoria*. Melbourne: Victoria University.

[https://vuir.vu.edu.au/41501/1/Dissenting%20Citizenship\\_VU%20final%20report%202020.pdf](https://vuir.vu.edu.au/41501/1/Dissenting%20Citizenship_VU%20final%20report%202020.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Carter, E. (2018) ‘Right-wing extremism/radicalism: reconstructing the concept’, *Journal of Political Ideologies* 23(2), 168.

<sup>4</sup> Carter (2018), 174.

<sup>5</sup> Bartlett, J., Birdwell, J., Littler, M. (2011) *The new face of digital populism*. London: Demos.

<sup>6</sup> Lauder, M. A. (2002). *The Far Right-wing Movement in Southwest Ontario: An Exploration of Issues, Themes, and Variations*. The Guelph and District Multicultural Centre.

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extremism') includes the following definition of far-right extremism as

traditionally driven by hatred and fear, and includes a range of individuals, group, often online communities that back a wide range of issues and grievances, including, but not limited to, anti-government and anti-law enforcement sentiment, advocacy of white nationalism and racial separation, anti-Semitism and Islamophobia, anti-immigration, male supremacy (misogyny) and homophobia.<sup>7</sup>

None of these ideological attributes – from racism to anti-democratic sentiments – necessarily determines whether or not someone is or is at risk of becoming a far-right extremist. Far-right extremist movements create, and operate within, parallel ideologically driven communities in radical and antagonistic opposition to the political mainstream. These communities generally reject basic principles of deliberative democracy. Yet those who identify with these far-right networks create alternative communities that promote a sense of belonging and connectedness with likeminded others, forming sustained in-group identities and bonds and enacting their ideological sentiments through verbal, physical, online and offline exchanges and activities.

It is also important to note that the boundaries of what constitutes 'far-right extremism' are considerably looser than previously based on the growth of what are sometimes called hybrid, mixed, or unclear, 'salad bar' or fluid ideologies. The term 'salad bar ideology' was used in 2020 by FBI Director Christopher Wray 'to describe the nature of some of the recent violent extremist threats'. Their ideologies, according to Director Wray, 'are kind of a jumble...a mixture of ideologies that don't fit together'.<sup>8</sup> The growth of conspiracy theories in particular, present for a long time but becoming more mainstreamed following the emergence of QAnon in the USA and the impacts of COVID-19, have seen an increasing intersection between conventional far-right extremist ideas and movements and these newer, more fluid ideological trends, particularly in online environments.<sup>9</sup>

The prevalence of certain ideological views or attitudes such as racism, homo/transphobia, conspiracy thinking or authoritarianism and anti-government sentiments increases someone's vulnerability to far-right radicalisation,<sup>10</sup> but they are not in themselves evidence of the risk or the rise of far-right extremism. Similarly, social isolation, loss of status or privilege, and economic insecurities may, under certain conditions, increase one's

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<sup>7</sup> Public Safety Canada (2019) *Terrorist Threat to Canada*. 3<sup>rd</sup> revision, April.

<https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/rsrscs/pblctns/pblc-rprt-trrrsm-thrt-cnd-2018/pblc-rprt-trrrsm-thrt-cnd-2018-en.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Hitchens A. & Ayad, M. (2023) *The age of incoherence: understanding mixed and unclear ideology extremism* NCITE/George Washington University Extremism Program, 5.

<https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs5746/files/2023-06/the-age-of-incoherence-final.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> Thomas, E. (2020) 'Far-right groups and conspiracy theories are being brought together through the internet', ASPI (Australian Strategic Policy Institute), <https://www.aspi.org.au/opinion/far-right-groups-and-conspiracy-theories-are-being-brought-together-through-internet>

<sup>10</sup> Goodwin, M., Cutts, D., Janta-Lipinski, L. (2016) 'Economic Losers, Protestors, Islamophobes or Xenophobes? Predicting Public Support for a Counter-Jihad Movement', *Political Studies* 64(1), 4–26.

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susceptibility to far-right narratives, but these are complex processes that interplay with, among many other factors, individuals' sense of marginalization, perceived lack of control, and desire for recognition, status and social connectedness.

In considering the rise of far-right extremism, therefore, we do not refer primarily to the potential increase in the prevalence of certain ideologies or socioeconomic circumstances (although these factors may contribute to increased vulnerability), but rather examine factors that can indicate the growth of online and offline far-right groups, communities and networks.

**B. Far-right extremism: The Australian context**

Recent CRIS research has found an exponential increase in the popularity of far-right online spaces.<sup>11</sup> This indicates that the far right is not only becoming more radicalised and bolder in their public display of their exclusivist agendas, as previous research has noted;<sup>12</sup> far-right movements also appear to be expanding in size and reach, particularly in online settings.

One example is the far-right alt-tech social media platform Gab, where the 'subgroup "Australia" saw a drastic increase in new members after Christchurch, from around 4,500 in mid-March 2019 to over 11,000 in June 2019, and has since continuously grown to over 45,000 members as of March 2021'.<sup>13</sup> Mainly fueled by anti-lockdown and anti-vax narratives, this number had increased to close to 74,000 as of May 2022. Certainly not all these 74,000 individuals were Australian citizens, given the international nature of these online spaces, but several factors suggest that many of them were located in Australia.

There has also been a large increase in followers of prominent Victorian far-right actors on Telegram, reaching over 15,000 over the past few years, especially during the heights of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many contextual factors may have contributed to this increase, but an important role has arguably been played by certain ideological (e.g. anti-government views) and personal overlaps between anti-lockdown and antivax movements and far-right milieus.

There is also evidence that far-right actors have deliberately and strategically tried to recruit members by co-opting the anti-lockdown/anti-vax movements. Australian white nationalist groups on Telegram, for example, refer to anti-lockdown Telegram groups as 'normie channels' that can be used to for recruitment purposes ('good to reach other Aussies'). Several Victorian-based white supremacy figureheads have sought to fuel grievances and anti-government sentiments within the anti-lockdown/anti-vax groups and attempted to co-opt them for their own ideological propaganda and recruitment. The leader of a white nationalist group in Victoria, for example, expressed his support and praise for anti-vax protesters but encouraged them to engage with his ideological proposition regarding white nationalism to achieve 'long term success' that moved beyond the immediate focus of anti-vax dissent.

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<sup>11</sup> Simmons, C. et al. (2021); Guerin, C. et al. (2020); Guerin, C. et al. (2021).

<sup>12</sup> Peucker, M. et al. (2018).

<sup>13</sup> Guerin et al. (2021), 7.

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**C. The relationship between declining of trust and rising extremism**

The decline of trust and increase in trust inequality is directly linked to far-right extremist radicalisation trends identified by ASIO. The Australian Director-General of Security's 2021 Annual Threat Assessment stated:

It's fair to say that threats to our safety and security didn't go away with the onset of COVID. In many areas, they evolved; in some they intensified.... For those intent on violence, more time at home online meant more time in the echo chamber of the internet on the pathway to radicalisation. They were able to access hate-filled manifestos and attack instructions, without some of the usual circuit breakers that contact with community provides.<sup>14</sup>

It is clear that when people do not trust the information from government or the evidence of experts, they will turn to other sources. This includes extremist messaging. It is not the case that, for instance, all anti-vaxxers are far-right extremists. However, it is true that those recruiting for religious and racial or ethnonational exclusivist causes are seeking to exploit this decline of trust and have found some willing to listen to their version of reality.

Far-right extremism has thus grown in part because of a void left by the decline of trust in the institutions that form civil society and in the broad economic and policy settings that have been in place in Australia since the 1980s. This is not unique to Australia. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) found that in 2019 only 45% of citizens trusted their government. It stated that 'trust in government is deteriorating in many OECD countries. Lack of trust compromises the willingness of citizens and business to respond to public policies and contribute to a sustainable economic recovery.' The OECD also noted that the 'breadth and depth of the COVID-19 crisis make it incumbent on the public sector to challenge existing models for measuring trust.'<sup>15</sup>

The 2023 Edelman Australia Trust Barometer's key finding was that "Australia is on a path to polarisation, driven by a series of macro forces that are weakening the country's social fabric and creating increasing division in society." The 2023 report also found that almost half of all Australians (45%) say the nation is more divided today than it was in the past.<sup>16</sup> Linked to this social phenomenon is the decline of trust in public information – the infodemic – that has been particularly amplified by the pandemic. The Edelman Trust Barometer in 2022 concluded that 'we find a world ensnared in a vicious cycle of distrust, fueled by a growing lack of faith in media and government. Through disinformation and division, these two institutions are

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<sup>14</sup> <https://www.asio.gov.au/publications/speeches-and-statements/director-generals-annual-threat-assessment-2021.html>

<sup>15</sup> OECD (2019) *Trust in Government*. [www.oecd.org/gov/trust-in-government.htm](http://www.oecd.org/gov/trust-in-government.htm)

<sup>16</sup> Edelman Australia (2023) *Edelman Trust Barometer 2023*. <https://www.edelman.com.au/sites/g/files/aatuss381/files/2023-02/2023%20Edelman%20Trust%20Barometer%20Report%20-%20AUS%2002-2023.pdf>

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feeding the cycle and exploiting it for commercial and political gain.’<sup>17</sup>

Trust is distributed across different communities in different ways. The Edelman Trust Barometer differentiates between ‘two different trust realities’ – high for the well-off and the more highly educated, and low for the economically and educationally disadvantaged. Trust inequality in Australia is among the worst in the world. This has brought ‘an additional layer of complexity as [institutions] try to share information and communicate effectively with two distinct audiences: one that trusts, and one that doesn’t.’<sup>18</sup> In Australia this has meant that ‘distrust’ is now often the default. A key finding of the 2022 Edelman Trust Barometer in Australia is that ‘a majority of Australians (55%) say their default tendency is to distrust something until they see evidence it is trustworthy. Another 61% say it has gotten to a point where Australians are incapable of having constructive and civil debates about issues they disagree on – a foundational trait of a functioning and productive society, especially in democratic nations’.<sup>19</sup>

The economic and policy settings around globalisation and economic efficiency, in particular, are seen as having led to a decline in the availability of secure employment, further eroding trust in public institutions and government bodies responsible for social and economic wellbeing. These trends have led, for example, to the vote for ‘Brexit’ in the UK, the ‘MAGA’ rhetoric in the USA and the rise of populism in countries including Hungary and Brazil. These concerns have been further exploited by extreme actors who have sought to use them to undermine support for democratic institutions and to demonise foreigners and immigrants.

In Australia, we have seen similar amplification of populist sentiment by segments of political, media and social influencers, which have further legitimised and normalised a public discourse environment in which such ‘post-truth’ claims are increasingly difficult to challenge and refute. This post-truth uncertainty in turn fuels the ways in which misinformation and mistrust have been leveraged by far-right extremists to sow doubt and discord in relation to Australian community and national cohesion.

We now turn to addressing specific elements of the Inquiry’s Terms of Reference in the following section.

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<sup>17</sup> <https://www.edelman.com.au/trust-barometer-2022-australia>

<sup>18</sup> Edelman Australia (2021) ‘Australia’s false dawn’. [www.edelman.com.au/australias-false-dawn#](http://www.edelman.com.au/australias-false-dawn#)

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.edelman.com.au/trust-barometer-2022-australia>

## Addressing the Terms of Reference

***(a) the nature and extent of movements and persons holding extremist right-wing views in Australia, with a particular focus on:***

***(i) the threat posed by extremist movements, including right-wing extremism***

While ASIO lowered the overall national terrorism threat level from ‘probable’ to ‘possible’ in November 2022, where it remains today. there is a consensus among security agencies, extremism scholars and practitioners that political violence and terrorism remains a serious concern in Australia. As ASIO’s Director-General emphasized in February [2023](#), ‘it remained entirely plausible there would be a terrorist attack in Australia within twelve months, and that our biggest concern was individuals and small groups who could move to violence without warning, using weapons such as guns.’

ASIO has repeatedly highlighted that, given its mandate, it is only interested in political violence or violent extremism and does not focus its attention on ‘extremist views’ in the absence of the risk or threat of violence. However, there has been increasing recognition that the threats posed by far-right extremism in particular include but also significantly extend beyond the risk of escalation into political violence. This is due in part to the way in which the boundary lines between ‘mainstream’ and ‘fringe’ perspectives are considerably more blurred when it comes to far-right extremism than is the case in other ideological contexts.

In assessing the rise and impact of far-right extremism in Australia, many academics, practitioners and government experts have concluded that it poses an increasingly complex threat. In his 2024 Annual Threat Assessment, the ASIO Director-General highlighted the increasing complexity of terrorist threats in Australia in general and illustrated this assessment by referring to ‘ideologically motivated extremists switching between ideologies and merging components from different ones to create new, hybrid beliefs; a perverse “choose your own adventure” approach to radicalisation’.<sup>20</sup>

Similarly, a soon-to-be published CRIS study on far-right extremist intervention capability found that many expert government and community stakeholders familiar with preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) frameworks identified as a major challenge the increasing complexities, fragmentation and eclectic nature of far-right extremism, as well as its ideational and socially networked overlaps with other ideological narratives and movements (e.g. anti-government, sovereign citizens, incels, conspiracy). For further discussion of these trends, please see the submissions by the Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies to previous Commonwealth and Victorian inquiries on extremism, which appear in **Appendix A** to this submission.

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<sup>20</sup> <https://www.oni.gov.au/asio-annual-threat-assessment-2024>



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The evidence on both ideological and network fragmentation also points to the relatively limited and mutable organisational structures of Australia's milieu and movements, which are characterised by constrained and volatile leadership capacity and mostly small and often informal cells and networks rather than many formal organisations. The only significant exceptions are two closely connected openly neo-Nazi organisations, the National Socialist Network (NSN) and the European Australian Movement (AEM), both formed in Victoria with branches in other states, which have established themselves as the most prominent and active organisational actors within Australia's far-right extremist scene.<sup>21</sup>

The academic, public and political debate around far-right extremism both domestically and transnationally increasingly acknowledges that the threats far-right extremist actors and movements pose in Australia are manifold. These include the following interconnected threats:

### *Violence*

The most obvious threat that far-right extremism poses in Australia and beyond is that of political violence and terrorism. While to date no far-right extremist-motivated act of violence has been successfully executed in Australia, a number of plots have been successfully disrupted.

One Victorian man with ties to several extreme far-right groups, Phillip Galea, was convicted and sentenced to 12 years imprisonment for 'doing acts in preparation for, or planning, a terrorist act (attack on a socialist centre and a trade union hall), and for attempting to collect or make a document likely to facilitate a terrorist act' (The *Patriot's Cookbook*; building explosives and 'wag[ing] war against Muslims and lefties').<sup>22</sup> Several other far-right extremist individuals have been charged with, or convicted of, other offences seemingly related to their political activities (e.g. violent assault, preparing explosives, violent threats) in recent years, although the judge did not always acknowledge the (partially) political elements of these offences. In addition, one of the worst far-right extremist terrorist attacks in recent years was committed by an Australian man who killed 51 people at two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand in March 2019.

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<sup>21</sup> McKenzie, M. and Tozer, J. (2021) 'Inside Racism HQ: How home-grown neo-Nazis are plotting a white revolution', *The Age*, 16 August. <https://www.theage.com.au/national/inside-racism-hq-how-home-grown-neo-nazis-are-plotting-a-white-revolution-20210812-p58i3x.html>; McKenzie, N. (2022) 'Inside Australia's 'terrorgram': How neo-Nazism spreads in our cities', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 August; <https://www.smh.com.au/national/inside-australia-s-terrorgram-how-neo-nazism-spreads-in-our-cities-20220726-p5b4t5.html>; Printcev, S. (2024) 'A national issue': What we know about the neo-Nazis NSW wants to 'name and shame', *SBS*, 31 January. <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/what-we-know-about-the-neo-nazis-nsw-wants-to-to-name-and-shame/ibkwri6vr>; Keane, D. (2022) 'SA Police investigating racist flyers dispersed by right-wing groups in suburban Adelaide', *ABC*, 13 May. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-05-13/sa-police-investigating-right-wing-flyers-left-in-letter-boxes/101062966>

<sup>22</sup> Tran, D. (2020) 'Far-right terrorist Phillip Galea jailed for 12 years after plotting against "Muslims and lefties" in Melbourne', *ABC News*, 20 November. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-11-20/far-right-terror-plotter-phillip-galea-sentenced-in-melbourne/12903588>

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Beyond these incidents involving far-right extremist actors' (alleged) criminal behaviour, it is important to note the challenges of determining precisely when the violence threshold is reached. According to The Australian Government's Living Safe Together program, violent extremism refers to 'a person or group who is willing to use violence; or advocates the use of violence by others, to achieve a political, ideological or religious goal.'<sup>23</sup> This suggests that far-right extremist violence encompasses more than physical acts of violence and includes speech and behaviours that indicate willingness to use violence or advocate for it. As research has consistently demonstrated, far-right extremist online spaces –including in Australia (Guerin et al. 2021)<sup>24</sup> – contain high levels of what Simi and Windisch describe as 'violent talk', highlighting the link between online speech and action:

Violent talk helps enculturate individuals through socialization processes by communicating values and norms. In turn, these values and norms are part of a process where in-group and out-group boundaries are established, potential targets for violence are identified and dehumanized, violent tactics are shared, and violent individuals and groups are designated as sacred.... In short, violent talk clearly plays an important role in terms of fomenting actual violence.<sup>25</sup>

*Threats to democratic principles and institutions*

The Australian government's Living Safe Together program<sup>26</sup> highlights that the threats of violent extremism also include threats to 'Australia's core values and principles, including human rights, the rule of law, democracy, equal opportunity and freedom'. As CRIS outlined in its 2022 submission to the Victorian Parliament's Inquiry into Extremism (see **Appendix A**), these threats to democracy have ideological, behavioural and social dimensions, including:

Opposition to liberal-democratic principles

First, far-right extremism is defined by, among other ideological markers, its opposition to basic liberal-democratic principles. The explicit rejection of the basic principle of equal human dignity and egalitarianism illustrates this assessment. Many far-right extremist groups seek to directly or indirectly undermine and ultimately overthrow our democratic system to usher in an authoritarian ethno-nationalist regime. A 2020 Macquarie University study maintained that far-right extremism 'challenge[s] the fundamentals of pluralist liberal democracy through exclusivist appeals to race, ethnicity, nation, and gender'.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> <https://www.livingsafetogether.gov.au/get-the-facts>

<sup>24</sup> Guerin, C. et al. (2021).

<sup>25</sup> Simi, P. and Windisch, S. (2020) 'The Culture of Violent Talk: An Interpretive Approach', *Social Sciences*, 9(7), 11. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci9070120>

<sup>26</sup> See <https://www.livingsafetogether.gov.au>

<sup>27</sup> Macquarie University (2020) *Mapping Networks and Narratives of Online Right-Wing Extremists in New South Wales* (Executive Summary), 2. [https://researchers.mq.edu.au/files/141544840/Publisher\\_version.pdf](https://researchers.mq.edu.au/files/141544840/Publisher_version.pdf)

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Intimidation and interference in democratic electoral processes

Second, far-right extremist threats to democracy are not merely ideological but can also manifest in certain *actions*. A recent study by Peucker et al.<sup>28</sup> concluded that far-right mobilisation in the local context can intimidate democratically elected representatives in government and thus illegitimately influence democratic decision-making processes. There have also been concerns around the risk of far-right extremist actors trying to infiltrate mainstream political parties.<sup>29</sup> In other countries, efforts to engage in electoral manipulation of polling and intimidation of voters has characterised far-right extremist movements,<sup>30</sup> and the US January 6<sup>th</sup> Capitol riots, which sought to overturn the results of the United States democratic presidential vote in 2020, posed explicitly violent threats to citizens, lawmakers and law enforcement.

Echo chambers and parallel communities

Third, the far-right extremist milieu in Australia has also created online and offline echo chamber and parallel communities where individuals develop a sense of connection and social belonging. Given the ideological nature of far-right extremism, these parallel fringe communities – what Mark Davis calls ‘anti-publics’ – not only oppose basic liberal-democratic principles, they also fundamentally reject democratic *processes* of engagement and deliberation and cultivate ‘a level of hostility to democratic conventions and institutions that in general exceeds ... even the most permissive notion of an “agonistic” public sphere’.<sup>31</sup> A 2023 study by Peucker and Spaaij further highlighted the deeply conspiratorial alternative epistemology within these parallel counter-hegemonic communities, which puts them at odds with democratic processes and expressions of dissent.<sup>32</sup>

*Perceptions of community safety*

The third type of threat posed by far-right extremism poses is difficult to quantify and remains underexamined in public and political debate. Public stunts, protests and other actions taken by far-right extremist groups have created significant concerns and perceived threats to public and community safety for those who feel intimidated and/or threatened by such actions, including the public display of far-right, neo-Nazi or other white supremacy ideologies, agendas and symbols. This applies to majority or mainstream community

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<sup>28</sup> Peucker, M., Spaaij, R., Smith, D., Patton S. (2020).

[https://vuir.vu.edu.au/41501/1/Dissenting%20Citizenship\\_VU%20final%20report%202020.pdf](https://vuir.vu.edu.au/41501/1/Dissenting%20Citizenship_VU%20final%20report%202020.pdf)

<sup>29</sup> See for example <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/jun/05/victorian-liberals-fear-far-right-extremist-youtuber-dia-beltran>; <https://theconversation.com/victorian-liberals-embarrassed-by-extremists-within-how-does-this-keep-happening-194984>

<sup>30</sup> Center on Extremism (2022) ‘Conspiracy theorists and extremists using various tactics to manipulated US election process’, Anti-Defamation League, 19 October. <https://www.adl.org/resources/blog/conspiracy-theorists-and-extremists-using-various-tactics-manipulate-us-election>; Warburton, M and Lange, J (2022), ‘Two in five US voters worry about intimidation at polls – Reuters/Ipsos’, *Reuters.Com*, 26 October, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/exclusive-two-five-us-voters-worry-about-intimidation-polls-reutersipsos-2022-10-26/>

<sup>31</sup> Davis, M. (2021) ‘The online anti-public sphere’, *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 24(1), 144.

<sup>32</sup> Peucker, M. and Spaaij, R. (2023) ‘Alternative Epistemology in Far-Right Anti-Publics: A Qualitative Study of Australian Activists’, *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10767-023-09456-z>

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members, but also particularly to those who identify with communities that are specifically targeted by far-right extremist narratives and propaganda such as LGBTQIA+, Jewish and Muslim communities and other ethnoculturally diverse groups for whom far-right extremist actions are often experienced as a concrete and immediate threat to their physical safety. A 2020 large-scale survey among Muslims, for example, found that 93% of Muslim respondents expressed concerns about right-wing extremism.<sup>33</sup>

According to another 2020 study,<sup>34</sup> the local anti-mosque mobilisation in the Victorian regional town of Bendigo in the mid-2010s (which at some stages also included far-right extremist actors) had serious negative impacts on sense of safety among the local Muslim community, with some of them feeling too unsafe to leave their homes alone or at night. These locally specific concerns were further exacerbated by the murderous 2019 Christchurch terror attacks, which continue to weigh heavily on the sense of safety among many Australian Muslims. A 2021 report by the Australian Human Rights Commission noted that 80% of surveyed Australian Muslims stated that '[Christchurch] made them more afraid for their community. Some noted the long-term effects of the attack, describing the emotional and mental toll the attack took on their everyday life.'<sup>35</sup>

***(ii) The motivations, objectives and capacity for violence of extremist groups and individuals holding such views***

*The diversity of Australian far-right actors*

The propagation of narratives of victimhood and injustice, and the articulation of and attempt to remedy perceived grievances – what Marcks and Pawelz term 'narratives of imperilment' – are both hallmarks of violent extremist movements across the spectrum, including those on the far right.<sup>36</sup> These narratives of victimhood and grievance may often be grounded local or domestic experiences or circumstances, but they also travel, across both geographical boundaries and historical periods.

While many members of Australian publics may think of far-right extremism as limited to recently amplified white ethnonationalist and white supremacy movements such as neo-Nazism, the phenomenon of far-right ethnonationalism in Australia is both older and broader

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<sup>33</sup> Halim, R. et al (2020) Islam in Australia: A National Survey of Muslim Australian Citizens and Permanent Residents, *Religions*, 11(8), 419. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11080419>

<sup>34</sup> Peucker, M., Spaaij, R., Smith, D., Patton S. (2020).

<sup>35</sup> Australian Human Rights Commission (2021) *Sharing the Stories of Australian Muslims*. <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/race-discrimination/publications/sharing-stories-australian-muslims-2021>, 26.

<sup>36</sup> Mulholland, T., Murphy, K., Hardy, K., Porter, L. (2023) 'Understanding right-wing extremism in Australia: Testing an integrated unfairness grievance and outgroup threat framework', *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/18335330.2023.2287435>; Corner, E., Taylor, H., Bragias, A. (2023) 'Modelling drivers of grievance-fuelled violence', *Australian Institute of Criminology Trends & Issues*, 664, February. [https://www.aic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-02/ti664\\_modelling\\_drivers\\_of\\_grievance-fuelled\\_violence.pdf](https://www.aic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-02/ti664_modelling_drivers_of_grievance-fuelled_violence.pdf); Marcks, H. and Pawelz, J. (2020), 'From myths of victimhood to fantasies of violence: How far-right narratives of imperilment work', *Terrorism and Political Violence* 34(7), 1415-1432.

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than this.<sup>37</sup> In the 1920s, 30s and 40s, for example, far-right fascist and antisemitic groups such as the Australian League of Rights in South Australia and the New Guard paramilitary organisation and Centre Party, both in NSW, represented earlier iterations of Australian far-right extremist movements. This reflects the fact that many Australian migrants from a variety of countries and historical periods may continue to maintain links with the politics of their respective homelands. Continuities with, as well as the evolution of, far-right politics in the homeland can at times become a central consolidating and organising feature of community identity in diaspora settings. In Australia, such developments have included Croatian ultranationalists<sup>38</sup> drawing upon Ustaše fascist symbology, Greek diaspora members linked to the Golden Dawn<sup>39</sup> fascist movement, Serbian ultranationalists,<sup>40</sup> and Indian Hindutva nationalism.<sup>41</sup>

Ultranationalism within these and other communities has historically been framed in opposition to a perceived enemy, against whom significant historic animosity continues to play out, consolidating bonds in diaspora settings and helping preserve the image of an imagined and idealised long lost past and homeland. Studies on migrant communities have indicated that as the physical and familial connection to a homeland fades, communities often become increasingly focused upon a memory of their homeland that no longer exists in the present.<sup>42</sup> Overseas conflicts have also demonstrated the potential to spill over into local conflict; violence in 2023 between Hindu nationalists and Sikhs<sup>43</sup> in New South Wales, for example, represents the latest manifestation of an ongoing conflict that has proven deadly in the homeland. The potential for overseas conflicts to be leveraged by ideologically motivated actors to spur domestic conflict in Australia remains a continuing challenge.

### *White nationalists*

White nationalist movements have long existed in Australia and have a well-documented history,<sup>44</sup> although they have re-emerged more visibly in Australia in the past decade – beginning with the lead-up to the 2016 US presidential election, in which populist candidate

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<sup>37</sup> See Champion, K. (2022) *Chasing Shadows: The Untold and Deadly Story of Terrorism in Australia*, Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin.

<sup>38</sup> Cottle, D. and Keys, A. (2022) *Fascism in Exile: Ustasha-Linked Organisations in Australia*. London: Taylor & Francis.

<sup>39</sup> Safi, M. (2014) 'Golden Dawn: Australian branch of far-right Greek party raises cash', *The Guardian*, 29 September. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/29/golden-dawn-australian-branch-of-far-right-greek-party-raises-cash>

<sup>40</sup> Elder, J. (2011) 'Divided we fall', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 August. <https://www.smh.com.au/national/divided-we-fall-20110820-1j3ir.html>

<sup>41</sup> Osuri, G. (2011) 'Transnational bio/necropolitics: Hindutva and its avatars', *Somatechnics* 1(1), 138-160. <https://www.eupublishing.com/doi/abs/10.3366/soma.2011.0011>; Ghasiya, P., Ahnert, G., Sasahara, K. (2023) 'Identifying themes of right-wing extremism in Hindutva discourse on Twitter', *Social Media and Society* 9(3). <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051231199457>

<sup>42</sup> For instance, Huah, A. (2005) 'Diaspora and cultural memory' in *Diaspora, Memory, and Identity: A Search for Home*, ed. Vijay Agnew. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. <https://doi.org/10.3138/9781442673878-012>

<sup>43</sup> 'Dziedzic, S. (2023) 'Australian authorities on alert as Sikh-Hindu tensions over Khalistan separatist movement boil over in Sydney', *ABC News*, 10 June. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-06-10/tensions-over-khalistan-separatist-movement-boil-over-in-sydney/102463024>

<sup>44</sup> Champion (2022), *Chasing Shadows*.

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Donald Trump coined the term ‘Make America Great Again’ – inspiring and emboldening local Australian actors and networks such as the True Blue Crew, United Patriots Front, Antipodean Resistance and Lads Society. These groups, some of which have morphed, consolidated or transitioned into new networks and formations, began developing a public profile through activities ranging from protests on the steps of Parliament House<sup>45</sup> and pamphleting and stickering in local suburbs to foot patrols by groups such as the Soldiers of Odin, as well as setting up both club houses and social media profiles. Their development and activities represent the contemporary blurring of boundaries between the online and offline environments, both of which they have leveraged for strategic recruitment and outreach purposes.<sup>46</sup>

### *Motivations*

Over time, the consolidation of various Australian so-called ‘patriot group’s and ‘men’s clubs’, modelling themselves upon American counterparts, has evolve into a committed core of hard-line far-right activists supported by a broader community of alt- and far-right social media actors. Groups such as the National Socialist Network and the European Australian movement, mentioned above, reflect this consolidation and are known for disseminating far-right, hate-filled messages. The NSN’s primary motivating ideology is to build a white ethnostate in Australia, expelling migrants, Jews, non-whites and those deemed ethnoculturally ‘other’. This represents an existential challenge to a modern Australia defined by multiculturalism and positive social relationships between people and communities from different nationalities, cultures, religions and ethnicities.

Such a project could only occur through a systematic program of ethnic cleansing, a long-term agenda strongly alluded to by key NSN activists.<sup>47</sup> The group’s leaders and members currently call for an end to migration, which ties into their broader narrative (borrowed from far-right actors oversea) concerning the so-called ‘great replacement’<sup>48</sup> of whites by migrants from the developing world. They also focus on declines in fertility rates, tapping into a deep-seated resentment of feminism<sup>49</sup>, which has brought women into the workforce and out of traditional roles as wives and mothers tending the home. Hard-fought and hard-won minority rights are also viewed through a lens of perceived victimisation, resentment and blame, with LGBTQIA+ communities viewed as undermining family values and the principles that bind a

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<sup>45</sup> AAP (2023) ‘Nazi salutes performed on steps of Victorian parliament as protesters clash over trans rights’, *SBS News*, 18 March. <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/nazi-salutes-performed-on-steps-of-victorian-parliament-as-protesters-clash-over-transgender-rights/yr7gzkevn>

<sup>46</sup> See for example Hutchinson, J., Iqbal, M., Peucker, M., Smith, D. (2022) ‘Online and offline coordination in Australia’s far right: A study of True Blue Crew’, *Social Sciences* 11(9). <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci11090421/>

<sup>47</sup> McKenzie, N. and Tozer, J. (2021).

<sup>48</sup> Ekman, M. (2022) ‘The great replacement: Strategic mainstreaming of far-right conspiracy claims’, *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 28(4), 1127-1143. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/13548565221091983>

<sup>49</sup> Agius, C., Edney-Browne, A., Nicholas, L., Cook, K. (2021) ‘Anti-feminism, gender and the far-right gap in C/PVE measures’, *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 15(3), 681-705. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2021.1967299>

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society together on the basis of traditionalist gender roles;<sup>50</sup> in some cases, violent threats both in Australia and overseas have been made against LGBTIQ+ groups and events, creating a climate of fear and persecution for those within these communities.<sup>51</sup> Far-right extremist groups similarly blame both the soft and hard political left for the introduction of progressive or 'woke' values that are seen to pose threats to their vision of a desirable social order, allied at times to hostility to political 'elites' whom they see as interfering with or obstructing the 'natural' order of society.

This can at times be aligned with the transnational tendency across far-right groups to link their ideological coordinates and activities to outdoor pursuits in nature, drawing upon the traditions of the *Völkisch* and Hitler Youth movements in Nazi Germany, which emphasised physical fitness, outdoor activity, and paramilitary training. It can also include gym-based networks and 'fight club' style arrangements, popular with a variety of alt-and far-right groups such as the Proud Boys, which often emphasise training with weights, hiking and mixed martial arts training.<sup>52</sup> These trends can sometimes coalesce into the desire to create isolationist bulwarks that are separate from incursions into or scrutiny by mainstream society or authorities, for example, through the purchase of land<sup>53</sup> on which to nourish their movements and engage in militia-style combat training for anticipated or desired struggles against outgroups or the state – an impulse allied with the core features of *accelerationism*,<sup>54</sup> a strategy adopted by many white supremacist movements to provoke widespread interracial tension and conflict that will topple the existing 'corrupt' socio-political order and allow for its complete rebuilding as an ethnonational state.

Alongside this run parallel developments within alternative wellness movements, which, as Gerrand and Scrinzi have noted, now see 'right-wing extremist movements based on conspiracy theories...intersecting with elements of Western wellness communities by drawing on a longer history of enmeshment between discourses of moral and spiritual virtue, white supremacy, ideological purity, and essentialist understandings of gender and bodily health. ... Built around a shared propensity to conspiracism...these novel formations represent an increasingly urgent yet understudied phenomenon within scholarship on

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<sup>50</sup> Busbridge, R., Moffitt, B., Thorburn, J. (2019) 'Cultural Marxism: far-right conspiracy theory in Australia's culture wars', *Social Identities: Journal for the Study of Race, National and Culture* 26(6), 722-738. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13504630.2020.1787822>

<sup>51</sup> Gill, G. (2023) 'Extremist violence against the trans and LGBTQI+ community in Australia: A review of recent events', *GNET (Global Network on Extremism and Technology) Insights*, 21 July. <https://gnet-research.org/2023/07/21/extremist-violence-against-the-trans-and-lgbtqi-community-in-australia-a-review-of-recent-events/>; 'Why far-right groups are increasingly targeting the LGBTQ community', *PBS News Hour (USA)*, 14 June. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/why-far-right-groups-are-increasingly-targeting-the-lgbtq-community>

<sup>52</sup> Estcourt, D. (2022) 'Inside the Melbourne boxing gym with a neo-Nazi underbelly', *The Age*, 24 December. <https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/inside-the-melbourne-boxing-gym-with-a-neo-nazi-underbelly-20221223-p5c8ga.html>

<sup>53</sup> McKenzie, N. (2023) 'Soldiers of hate: Army investigates neo-Nazis in its ranks', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 March. <https://www.smh.com.au/national/soldiers-of-hate-army-investigates-neo-nazis-in-its-ranks-20230314-p5crvv.html>

<sup>54</sup> Institute for Strategic Dialogue (2022) 'Accelerationism', *ISD Explainers*, <https://www.isdglobal.org/explainers/accelerationism/>

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extremist movements'.<sup>55</sup>

Extending and amplifying such dynamics are the online activities of far-right movements in Australia, which include spreading hate-filled messages on platforms including Telegram and X (formerly Twitter), which has recently allowed such groups back onto its platform.<sup>56</sup> This has enabled such groups to build a de-territorialised movement and connect with fellow far-right extremists globally. Far-right extremists will hold online forums and conversations, like, share and comment on each other's posts, and attack those they stand against, ranging from politicians and academics to traditional targets of hate groups including migrants, feminists and LGBTQIA+ activists. The aim is to shift the boundaries of political and policy debate – sometimes referred to as the 'Overton Window'<sup>57</sup> – by normalising hate speech and thereby making it acceptable to voice extremist hate-filled ideas in order to influence the wider body politic and influence mainstream political discourse. It is also important to note the increasing ideological convergences in far-right extremist groups and narratives -- what US terrorism scholar John Horgan refers to as 'ideological promiscuity'<sup>58</sup> – which involves the mash-up of different elements of ideologies from various group to give voice to individual grievances that can also escalate to group-level grievances – incel (involuntary celibate) movements are one example of this phenomenon, and the intersection of elements of far-right ideology with sovereign citizen and other anti-government movements is another.

There are multiple explanatory frameworks for analysing such trends. Here, we focus on two key underlying psycho-social structures – those of *masculinity* and of *anger* – that can help provide some insight into the motivational drivers of extremism with a particular focus on far-right extremism.

### *Masculinity*

The concept of masculinity, understood as 'the social construction of what it is to be a man',<sup>59</sup> defines the social expectations of manhood and the social structuring of hierarchies based on the privileging of what is considered 'masculine', and the accompanying devaluation of what is considered 'feminine'.

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<sup>55</sup> Gerrand, V. and Scrinzi, F. (2023) 'Awake, not woke: militant wellness, gender and white supremacy', conference paper, European Consortium for Political Research General Conference, Charles University, Czech Republic, 4-8 September, <https://ecpr.eu/Events/Event/PaperDetails/70345>; see also Gerrand, V. (2020), 'Pete Evans, militant wellness and Nazism', *Overland*, 2 December. <https://overland.org.au/2020/12/pete-evans-militant-wellness-and-nazism/>

<sup>56</sup> McHugh, F. (2023) 'Notorious Australian neo-Nazi appears to be posting on X', *SBS News*, 6 December.

<https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/notorious-australian-neo-nazi-appears-to-be-posting-on-x/jmpst9dp>

<sup>57</sup> Mackinac Center for Public Policy (n.d.) 'The Overton Window', <https://www.mackinac.org/OvertonWindow>

<sup>58</sup> Horgan, J. (2022) 'Involuntary celibacy in an age of ideological promiscuity: A catalyst for rethinking approaches to terrorist motivation', Facing Radicalisation and Extremism in Times of Social Unrest Lecture, Security in Open Societies/Security History Network, Universiteit Utrecht, 14 September.

<sup>59</sup> Bridges, T. S. and Kimmel, M. (2011) 'Engaging men in the United States: Soft essentialism and the obstacles to coherent initiatives in education and family policy' in *Men and Masculinities Around the World: Global Masculinities*, ed. E. Ruspini, J. Hearn, B. Pease and K. Pringle, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 159-173. [https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230338005\\_12](https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230338005_12)



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Participants in violent extremist groups are often, though not always, men. However, this alone is not what is meant by understanding the role of masculinity in extremist movements. Instead, it is important to understand the ways in which the origins, ideologies, internal processes, and means of recruitment for such groups are tied in powerful ways to concepts of masculinity,<sup>60</sup> to the political, cultural, and economic relations of many men's lives, to influential ideologies about men and gender, and to narratives about both men's and women's roles and position in society.

Deep societal change resulting from the decline of the welfare state, key societal institutions including trade unions and organised religions, and trust in government has been accompanied by key shifts created by free-market economics, including precarious, insecure and short-term work, the rise of women as a proportion of the formal workforce (which has been interpreted by some masculinist ideologies as accelerating the displacement of men from their rightful dominance in the labour force), the industrial protections afforded to women to ensure their full participation the workplace, and higher levels of competition for fewer meaningful or secure jobs. Michael Kimmel sees this as producing a sense of 'aggrieved entitlement'<sup>61</sup> amongst some men who feel that the privileges once attached to manhood no longer exist.

However, the challenges created by such dynamics are deeper than this. For some men, no sense of entitlement exists at all. Men on such stagnating, downward or zero-sum social trajectories are increasingly unlikely to attract partners, resulting in higher levels of singledom and, as is the case for 'Involuntary celibates' or 'incels', heightened levels of sexual frustration and feelings of rejection or hopelessness that translate into anger and resentment, priming such individuals for engagement with far-right ideologies and sentiments<sup>62</sup> as reflected in far-right extremist preoccupations with the domestic role of women and marked antipathy toward feminism.<sup>63</sup>

As men turn online and find communities of likeminded actors whom they may never otherwise have encountered in face-to-face settings, an online ecosystem<sup>64</sup> has developed driven by visceral emotional responses to social change amongst men who do not perceive themselves to be doing well - a cresting space for far-right extremists and anti-women grifters or misogynistic influencers alike.

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<sup>60</sup> Roose, J. M., Flood, M., Greig, A., Alfano, M., Copland, S. (2022) *Masculinity and Violent Extremism*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-031-10497-8>

<sup>61</sup> Kimmel, M. (2017) *Angry White Men: American Masculinity at the End of an Era*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. New York: Nation Books.

<sup>62</sup> Mamié, R. Ribeiro, M. H., West, R. (2021) 'Are anti-feminist communities gateways to the far right? Evidence from Reddit and You Tube', *WebSci '21: Proceedings of the 13<sup>th</sup> ACM Web Science Conference*, 139-147. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3447535.3462504>

<sup>63</sup> Roose, J. M. (2021) *The New Demagogues: Religion, Masculinity and the Populist Epoch*. London and New York: Routledge. <https://www.routledge.com/The-New-Demagogues-Religion-Masculinity-and-the-Populist-Epoch/Roose/p/book/9781138364707>

<sup>64</sup> Ribeiro, M. H., Blackburn, J., Bradlyn, B., De Cristofaro, E., Stringhini, G., Long, S., Greenberg, S., Zannettou, S. (2021) 'The evolution of the manosphere across the web', *Proceedings of the International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media* 15(1), 196-207. <https://doi.org/10.1609/icwsm.v15i1.18053>

*Anger and resentment*

Anger involves being in a state of emotional arousal. It can be linked to feelings of disempowerment and associated emotions of shame, humiliation and grief resulting from perceived unfairness, sense of injury and frustration, incubating resentment and sense of grievance towards those people, groups, institutions or forces that are held responsible for such perceived negative feelings and experiences. Research demonstrates that the gap between expected and actual life trajectories can become a process of 'shattered dreams',<sup>65</sup> leaving those who experience this gap feeling both broken and aggrieved. This can result in the search for an alternate source of meaning that helps both make sense of one's suffering and potentially offers some remedy for this experience.

Consequently, we now see status frustration combined with a sense of nostalgia for a time and place in which men were seen as powerful, successful and had a pathway toward guaranteed upward economic and social trajectories. As a result of such dynamics, we are also seeing the long-term trend of radicalised angry men moving beyond younger age groups alone into middle-aged cohorts<sup>66</sup> preoccupied with and feeling betrayed by the impacts of downward or denied socio-economic trajectories to which they believe they are entitled. It is precisely these dynamics that extremist narratives target and attempt to leverage.

Like other forms of extremism,<sup>67</sup> the emotional pitch of far-right extremist messaging is highly calibrated and explicitly framed to capture and exploit anger in ways that see personal experiences of anger channeled toward social issues and social change in ways that are profoundly antisocial when they involve the reduction or denial of rights, dignity and wellbeing to others as a consequence. Understanding the role that anger plays in this context can provide insights on the success of far-right groups who are able to tap into this emotion.

A current study by Roose and others involving interviews with 40 Australian men reveals that over half experienced anger at least weekly, with over three-quarters of men in the study experiencing anger at least monthly. Over 50% of participants stated that being slighted by others drove their anger. Over 50% also linked their anger to the experience of perceived deficits of one form or another, including a lack of ability or control. However, just over one-third of men in the study discussed wider societal injustice as driving their anger. Hatred linked to anger, whilst rejected by a majority of study participants, was felt by almost half the respondents to be due to an experience of personal injustice or maltreatment by another, a critical finding. A sense of having been mistreated or slighted is a core mobilising element for the attraction to extremist narratives, which can help make sense of these complex emotions.

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<sup>65</sup> Friedman, I. A. (2000) 'Burnout in teachers: Shattered dreams of impeccable professional performance', *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 56(5), 595-606. [https://doi.org/10.1002/\(SICI\)1097-4679\(200005\)56:5<595::AID-JCLP2>3.0.CO;2-Q](https://doi.org/10.1002/(SICI)1097-4679(200005)56:5<595::AID-JCLP2>3.0.CO;2-Q)

<sup>66</sup> Jensen, M. (2023) 'The link between age and extremism', *Generations*, American Society on Aging, March-April. <https://generations.asaging.org/link-between-age-and-extremism>

<sup>67</sup> Roose, J. M. (2016) *Political Islam and Masculinity: Muslim Men in Australia*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-1-137-52230-6>

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Other studies have shown that anger and hatred are central to the messaging of violent extremist groups, terrorists, and their narratives. Such groups are also adept at framing violence through a defensive, rather than offensive lens, asserting that any attack, no matter how violent, is righteous and just.<sup>68 69</sup> In this context, counter-narrative messaging – put simply, telling someone they are wrong or at risk of ending up in trouble – can miss the mark, or actually be counter-productive. Alternative narratives, by contrast, emphasise the positive possibilities of engaging in wider society to reframe and replenish resources for coping with problematic experiences and dynamics – which can include prosocial activism for socio-economic change. They offer options to replace feelings of frustration, deprivation and worthlessness with sense of efficacy and can go hand in hand with positive education emphasising the development of healthy and prosocial masculinity. Such approaches emphasise core values and principles as well as critical thinking that, taken together, can act to build resilience to the potential for far-right, emotionally laden extremist messaging to gain traction.

*Capacity for violence*

Australian far-right extremists have a demonstrated capability for violent action. True Blue Crew member Philip Galea remains imprisoned for a thwarted terror plot in Victoria,<sup>70</sup> while NSN leader Thomas Sewell has been prosecuted twice for violent assault.<sup>71</sup> Brenton Tarrant, the Christchurch terrorist who murdered 51 Muslims in New Zealand, was Australian. Beyond such executed or planned acts of ideologically motivated violence, however, far-right extremist ideology, as can other modes of extremist thought, may also incite acts of violence by lone actors who may not be formally affiliated with a group or movement through stochastic terrorism.<sup>72</sup> Such actors are inspired by key figures and movements and seek to further their far-right goals through carrying out terror attacks. They are very often then venerated as ‘Saints’ of the movement, as has been the case with Brenton Tarrant on various far-right chat forums and social media channels.<sup>73</sup> Far-right propaganda framed as dystopian fiction, such as *The Turner Diaries*<sup>74</sup> – an explicitly apocalyptic, antisemitic, white supremacist novel which refers to a day of reckoning (heralding the birth of the ‘New World Order’) known

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<sup>68</sup> Roose, J. M., Flood, M., Alfano, M. (2020) *Challenging the use of masculinity as a recruitment mechanism in extremist narratives*. Research Report for Department of Justice and Community Safety. [https://www.academia.edu/45131882/Challenging\\_the\\_Use\\_of\\_Masculinity\\_as\\_a\\_Recruitment\\_Mechanism\\_in\\_Extremist\\_Narratives](https://www.academia.edu/45131882/Challenging_the_Use_of_Masculinity_as_a_Recruitment_Mechanism_in_Extremist_Narratives)

<sup>69</sup> Roose, J. M. et al. (2022).

<sup>70</sup> Tran, D. (2020).

<sup>71</sup> AAP (2023) ‘Neo-Nazi Thomas Sewell avoids jail time over “brutal” attack on Nine Network security guard’, *The Guardian*, 12 January. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/jan/12/neo-nazi-thomas-sewell-avoids-jail-time-over-brutal-attack-on-nine-network-security-guard>

<sup>72</sup> Angove, J. (2024) ‘Stochastic terrorism: critical reflections on an emerging concept’, *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 17(1), 21-43. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2024.2305742>

<sup>73</sup> Lewis, J., Molloy, J., Macklin, G. ‘The lineage of violence: Saints culture and militant accelerationist terrorism’, *Global Network on Extremism and Technology*, 27 April. <https://gnet-research.org/2023/04/27/the-lineage-of-violence-saints-culture-and-militant-accelerationist-terrorism/>

<sup>74</sup> Pierce, W. L. (1978) *The Turner Diaries*. National Vanguard Press. See <https://www.adl.org/resources/background/turner-diaries>

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as the ‘Day of the Rope’ in which the militants’ enemies are hunted down and executed -- has long been an inspirational guide and staple of such movements, including ‘accelerationists’, mentioned above, who wish to bring forth an apocalyptic race war.<sup>75</sup>

***b) the terms and operation of the Counter-Terrorism Legislation Amendment (Prohibited Hate Symbols and Other Measures) Bill 2023***

Many of the right-wing conspiracies over the past century have been very persistent. The most violent of racially charged, conspiracy-based extremist movements have been Nazism and other forms of fascism. The foundation of the modern study of violent extremism started with the work of those involved in the de-Nazification of Germany and Austria after World War II. Professor Norman Cohn’s work *Warrant for Genocide* (1967) revealed the persistence of certain conspiracy theories over many centuries, including the fake antisemitic ‘Protocols of the Elders of Zion’, the idea of ‘the end of days’, and focus on child sacrifice and abuse.<sup>76</sup> Cohn’s book *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1957) is a seminal study of the history of revolutionary millenarianism. Its last line continues to resonate today: ‘For it is the simple truth that, stripped of their original supernatural sanction, revolutionary millenarianism and mystical anarchism are still with us.’<sup>77</sup>

There are some risks with the legislation that need to be carefully managed. Banning the Nazi Hakenkreuz, the Nazi double-sig rune; and the salute may perversely make them more attractive to extremists and potentially help recruit new adherents if the ban is used as a lever to accelerate perceptions of government overreach or intrusion into the lives of citizens. Official censure may create something that further strengthens the bonding that is characteristic of in-group formations. While the legislation may reduce the number and frequency of Nazi symbols used in public, it may also help create a cause over which extremists who might otherwise differ in focus or emphasis can find common ground. Bonding capital is unfortunately ideologically neutral.

However, on balance, these risks are outweighed by the risk of permitting the continued public display of the symbol and the salute was being increasingly used by extremists in ways calculated to cause harm and distress in the broader community. A key threshold is what kind of harm a symbol does. There can be little debate about the intended harms of the Nazi symbol. It is a symbol that has been weaponised by extremists bent on intimidating others, and creating division, conflict, and fear. In a society such as ours, in which the power of images is becoming greater, it is important to outlaw the public display of this symbol.

Consideration could be given to banning the use of the well-established neo-Nazi alphabetical-numerical hate symbol ‘1488’, ‘14/88’ or ‘14-88’. ‘14’ refers to the 14-word slogan popularised by David Lane, ‘We must secure the existence of our people and a future

<sup>75</sup> Aarons, K. (2023) ‘Genealogy of far-right accelerationism’, *Pólemos* 2023(1), 261-294.

<https://philpapers.org/rec/AARGOF>

<sup>76</sup> Cohn, N. (1967) *Warrant for Genocide. The Myth of Jewish World-Conspiracy and the Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. London: Eyre and Spottiswoode.

<sup>77</sup> Cohn, N. (1957 [rev. ed. 1970]). *The Pursuit of the Millennium*. New York: Oxford University Press, 286.

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for white children'<sup>78</sup>, combined with 88, which references the letter 'H' in the 8<sup>th</sup> position of the alphabet and connotes the initials HH for 'Heil Hitler'<sup>79</sup>. This symbol is specific, does not bear other meanings and appears on a wide range of neo-Nazi paraphernalia that are available for purchase on the open market. '14' on its own is too generic to consider banning. Banning '88' alone would not be effective unless an exemption is made for the significance of the number '8' as a symbol of good luck or good fortune in Chinese numerology.

The appropriation of symbols by neo-Nazis has led, for instance, to the USA-based Anti-Defamation League (ADL) adding the 'OK' hand sign (finger-and-thumb gesture) to its list of hate symbols because it is being used by some as a 'sincere expression of white supremacy'.<sup>80</sup> However, the ADL did acknowledge that 'overwhelming usage' of the hand gesture today is still to show approval or that someone is OK.

Therefore, great care should be taken before banning other neo-Nazi symbols and gestures, such as the white supremacist appropriation of the 'OK' symbol, as this may encourage creation or appropriation of new gestures and symbols and it is likely the proscription would constantly lag behind the creation and deployment of new symbols or gestures.

Some may argue that banning Nazi symbols unduly infringes free speech. Others can point to Karl Popper's 'paradox of tolerance' that 'in order to maintain a tolerant society, the society must be intolerant of intolerance'.<sup>81</sup>

There is a clear link between antisemitism and the persistence of tropes employed by the Nazis. A direct line, for example, may be drawn between the QAnon<sup>82</sup> conspiracy movement's central fantasy that a secret Satan-worshipping cabal is taking over the world and the basis of this in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century antisemitic tract *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. This spread into Australia even though it has no logical connection to Australian politics.

The legislative prohibition should not, however, be seen as a replacement for efforts to focus more broadly on the prevention of harms and early intervention by communities and government to strengthen social cohesion and resilience. As the Victorian Government's 2015 *Strategic Framework to Strengthen Victoria's Social Cohesion and the Resilience of its Communities* recognised, 'cohesive, resilient societies also recognise the need for prevention and early intervention efforts that aim to stop individuals starting or continuing along a path of violence against the rest of society, in pursuit of extremist ideologies.'<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Anti-Defamation League, '14 Words'. <https://www.adl.org/resources/hate-symbol/14-words>

<sup>79</sup> Anti-Defamation League, '1488'. <https://www.adl.org/resources/hate-symbol/1488>

<sup>80</sup> BBC News (2019) 'OK hand sign has been added to list of hate symbols', 27 September. <https://www.bbc.com/news/newsbeat-49837898>

<sup>81</sup> Popper, K. (2002) *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. London: Routledge, Note 4.

<sup>82</sup> Anti-Defamation League, 'QAnon'. <https://www.adl.org/resources/backgrounder/qanon>

<sup>83</sup> State of Victoria (2015) *Strategic Framework to Strengthen Victoria's Social Cohesion and the Resilience of its Communities*, Melbourne: Victorian Department of Premier and Cabinet. <https://apo.org.au/node/60689>

**c) Measures to counter violent extremism in Australia, with particular focus on young people**

Far-right extremism, defined above, has emerged as one of a continuing range of key threats to national security and wellbeing,<sup>84</sup> with enhanced activity in both online and offline contexts involving Australian nationals as both lone actors and within domestic or transnational groups, movements and networks. The threats posed by the variety of racial, ethnic, religious or gender-based exclusivist ideas and calls to action represented by the umbrella term of ‘far-right extremism’ relate not only to the explicit threat of physical violence against those designated as belonging to one or more ‘out-groups’<sup>85</sup> but also to the fraying, erosion of or attacks on national cohesion – what Candyce Kelshall terms ‘soft violence’<sup>86</sup> – and on the socio-cultural diversity that is a hallmark of Australia’s national identity.

**Should we be emphasising the ‘violent’, the ‘extremism’, or both?**

This has created some pressure to supplement Australia’s existing policy emphasis on the ‘violent’ in ‘violent extremism’<sup>87</sup> in order to invest in broader efforts to counter ‘hateful extremism’, as do some countries such as the United Kingdom.<sup>88</sup> ‘Right-wing extremism’, as an ideologically based cluster of linked socio-political movements, is now seen by some scholars and commentators as a compelling and urgent threat to liberal democracies in its commitment to undemocratic/authoritarian/autocratic modes of governance and the erosion or dismantling of universal human rights and dignity.

An example of this argument is made by West, who notes (alongside previous arguments by other scholars):<sup>89</sup>

The challenge of right-wing extremism extends beyond the specifics of terrorist violence, although that constitutes the most discreet and visceral manifestation. Right-wing extremism also has an abiding effect on the public discourse of a liberal democracy by impacting substantially on what is referred to as the Overton Window – the range of politically acceptable ideas at a given time. ...These efforts, which are not

<sup>84</sup> ASIO Annual Threat Assessment (2024). Canberra: Office of National Intelligence.

<https://www.oni.gov.au/asio-annual-threat-assessment-2024>

<sup>85</sup> Berger, J. M. (2017) *Extremist Construction of Identity: How escalating demands for legitimacy shape and define in-group and out-group dynamics*. Research Paper. The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism. <https://www.icct.nl/sites/default/files/2022-12/ICCT-Berger-Extremist-Construction-of-Identity-April-2017-2.pdf>

<sup>86</sup> Kelshall, C. (2021) ‘Soft violence, social radicalisation and violent transnational social movements’, *The Journal of Intelligence, Conflict and Warfare* 3(3). <https://doi.org/10.21810/jicw.v3i3.2800>

<sup>87</sup> Living Safe Together, ‘Get the facts’. <https://www.livingsafetogether.gov.au/get-the-facts>

<sup>88</sup> Commission for Countering Extremism (2019) *Challenging Hateful Extremism: Summary Version*.

London: Commission for Countering Extremism.

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5d95ef45ed915d39ad386a65/Challenging\\_Hateful\\_Extremism\\_-\\_summary\\_report.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5d95ef45ed915d39ad386a65/Challenging_Hateful_Extremism_-_summary_report.pdf)

<sup>89</sup> Waldek, L., Smith, D., Iqbal, M., Droogan, J. (2021) ‘Right-wing extremism weaponises democracy against itself’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 August. <https://www.smh.com.au/national/right-wing-extremism-weaponises-democracy-against-itself-20210816-p58j5g.html>

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dissimilar to the foreign interference efforts of hostile states, seek the ‘social diffusion of ideas and cultural values for the sake of provoking a profound, long-term, political transformation’.<sup>90</sup> Recognising the efforts of right-wing extremists to shift our politics away from a shared commitment to liberal democracy, both politically and culturally, is as important as ensuring that their efforts to undertake terrorist violence are disrupted.<sup>91</sup>

However, this creates a dilemma for liberal democratic nations, including Australia: how do we develop strategies to combat the social and political harms created by far-right extremism without adopting illiberal methods of doing so that can potentially undermine the core principles of liberal democracy itself?<sup>92</sup>

For those whose extremist ideas have developed against the backdrop of rights and liberties taken for granted in a liberal democracy and who use legal means of propagating their ideas, countering any form of ‘extremism’, whatever its ideological coordinates may be, can have the unintended consequence of further hardening their extremist stance due to perceptions of hypocrisy – that liberal democracies say one thing and do another.

In the case of far-right extremism, when individuals or groups use democratic means to promote anti-democratic values and agendas, it creates an overt challenge to governments to consider the extent to which they are prepared to diminish or abandon their own liberal democratic values in their efforts to address this. Should they choose to do so, it can further entrench the idea that governments are interested in little more than preserving their own continued survival, rather than adhering to the principles and values underpinning the system of governance that has empowered them to act.

The existing Living Safe Together<sup>93</sup> strategy, the Commonwealth’s primary CVE policy framework, recognises this by saying:

‘In Australia, every person has the right to hold and express their own beliefs. Individuals are free to:

- seek out new information and ideas,
- form and join organisations, and
- protest peacefully.’

By contrast, the Living Safe Together definition of ‘violent extremism’ focuses squarely on the behavioural dimensions of violence, defining this as ‘a person or group who is willing to use

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<sup>90</sup> Faye, G. (2001) *Why We Fight: Manifesto of the European Resistance*. Trans. M. O’Meara. Budapest: Arktos Media.

<sup>91</sup> West, L. (2023) ‘A strategy for securing Australian democracy’, *The Interpreter*, 9 March. Sydney: The Lowy Institute. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/strategy-securing-australian-democracy>

<sup>92</sup> See Zakaria, F. (1997) ‘The rise of illiberal democracy’, *Foreign Affairs*, 1 November. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/world/rise-illiberal-democracy>

<sup>93</sup> Living Safe Together, ‘Get the facts’. <https://www.livingsafetogether.gov.au/get-the-facts>

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violence’ or who ‘advocates the use of violence by others to achieve a political, ideological or religious goal’.

In any iteration of a new or revised CVE strategy, Australian policy and programming needs to tread carefully and thoughtfully in relation to both legislative posture and socio-political positioning of efforts to counter far-right extremism in ways that continue to protect the civil rights of citizens, balanced against the harms that such protections may create for other citizens in a racially, ethnically, religiously and culturally diverse country like Australia.

In this sense, an urgent task for updating the current national CVE strategy is to have a clear, shared definition of what we mean by ‘harms’ in relation to violent extremism; where the threshold lies between violent extremist harms and other forms of social harms (including but not limited to other forms of violence), and how we justify such definitions and thresholds, for example through state legislation banning the Nazi salute in Victoria<sup>94</sup> or the national ban on the display of Nazi symbols<sup>95</sup> on the basis of the harms they are deemed to cause when performed or circulated publicly. While such legislation has not been uncontroversial,<sup>96</sup> it has nevertheless had the benefit of establishing a reasonably clear threshold for determining the nature and severity of the harms being addressed.

### Current Australian CVE frameworks

Australia has generally robust frameworks for countering terrorism (CT) and countering violent extremism (CVE) at both Commonwealth and State/Territory level. Various iterations of the Australian CVE framework have been successively developed and implemented since 2006, beginning with the publication of the *National Action Plan to Build on Social Cohesion, Harmony and Security*.<sup>97</sup> These include successive national CVE strategies embedded within Australia’s Counter-Terrorism Strategies in the 2010 Counter Terrorism White Paper,<sup>98</sup> the

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<sup>94</sup> State Government of Victoria (2023) *Fact sheet: Ban of Nazi symbols and gestures*.

<https://www.vic.gov.au/fact-sheet-nazi-symbol-prohibition>

<sup>95</sup> Dreyfus KC MP, M. (2024) ‘Nazi salute and hate symbols now outlawed’, 8 January. Canberra: Attorney-General’s Department. <https://ministers.ag.gov.au/media-centre/nazi-salute-and-hate-symbols-now-outlawed-08-01-2024>; Houdsen, T. (2023) ‘Australia to introduce national ban on Nazi symbols’, *BBC News*, 8 June. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-australia-65840812>

<sup>96</sup> Roose, J. (2023) ‘Would a law banning the Nazi salute be effective—or enforceable?’, *ABC News*, 21 Jan. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-01-21/victoria-law-banning-nazi-salute-effective-enforceable/101877788>; Khalil, L. (2023) ‘Banning the Nazi salute opens a Pandora’s box’, 29 March.

Sydney: The Lowy Institute. <https://www.loyyinstitute.org/publications/banning-nazi-salute-opens-pandora-s-box>; Wertheim, P. (2023) ‘The federal government’s ban on Nazi symbols is a step in the right direction, but it needs to go further’, *ABC News*, 13 June. <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/ban-on-nazi-symbols-step-in-right-direction-but-not-enough/102474570>

<sup>97</sup> Ministerial Council on Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (2006) *A National Action Plan to Build on Social Cohesion, Harmony and Security*. Canberra: Ministerial Council on Immigration and Multicultural Affairs. <https://library.bsl.org.au/jspui/bitstream/1/1350/1/National-Action-Plan-2007.pdf>

<sup>98</sup> Australian Government (2010) *Counter-Terrorism White Paper: Securing Australia, Protecting Our Community*. Canberra: Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. [www.dst.defence.gov.au/sites/default/files/basic\\_pages/documents/counter-terrorism-white-paper.pdf](http://www.dst.defence.gov.au/sites/default/files/basic_pages/documents/counter-terrorism-white-paper.pdf)



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2015 Counter-Terrorism Strategy,<sup>99</sup> and the 2022 Counter-Terrorism Strategy.<sup>100</sup> At State and Territory level, there are a range of policy and program settings across jurisdictions that support and advance localised case management, early intervention and diversion, and community cohesion-building initiatives as well as efforts to disengage and reintegrate terrorist offenders in both correctional and community-based settings.

This policy orientation has included a consistent focus on *prevention, diversion and disengagement* (sometimes referred to as primary, secondary and tertiary interventions) of potential or committed violent extremist individuals. This includes the targeting of violent extremist *behaviours* rather than beliefs in line with principles regarding freedom of thought and expression in liberal democratic societies discussed above. It also prioritises building and sustaining *community resilience* to violent extremism to create more generally resilient communities that can meet and cope with a range of potentially destabilising current and future uncertainties, dynamics and transformations that affect how we are able to mobilise resources that support individual and collective wellbeing at local, regional and national levels.

### **CVE, far-right extremism and young people**

Successive ASIO threat assessments since 2020, as well as intelligence and observation from a range of law enforcement agencies at federal and State/Territory level, have made clear that the trends of increasing radicalisation to varieties of far-right extremism and the decreasing age of those who are drawn into violent extremist ideologies and networks are intertwined or at least running in parallel. In 2021, minors (under the age of 18) accounted for almost 15% of ASIO's counter-terrorism investigations and more than half of their priority counter-terrorism investigations,<sup>101</sup> and subsequent threat assessments have continued to emphasise the increase in the number of minors coming to ASIO's attention. The transnational picture is similar across countries such as the UK and Canada.

Hypotheses for this trend have included the dynamic affordances of social media reach, influence and diversification, and the profound impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the violent extremist landscape, particularly for young people. As a 2021 analysis suggests,<sup>102</sup> the impact of these developments for young people created an environment in which they were, and in some cases continue to be,

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<sup>99</sup> Council of Australian Governments (2015) *Australia's Counter-Terrorism Strategy: Strengthening Our Resilience*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia. <https://www.nationalsecurity.gov.au/what-australia-is-doing-subsite/Files/australias-counter-terrorism-strategy-2015.pdf>

<sup>100</sup> Australian Government (2022) *Safeguarding Our Community Together: Australia's Counter-Terrorism Strategy 2022*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia. <https://www.nationalsecurity.gov.au/what-australia-is-doing-subsite/Files/safeguarding-community-together-ct-strategy-22.pdf>

<sup>101</sup> Nicholson, B. (2022) 'ASIO chief flags alarming increase in children lured to extremism', *The Strategist*, 11 February. Canberra: Australian Strategic Policy Institute. <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/asio-chief-flags-alarming-increase-in-children-lured-to-extremism/>

<sup>102</sup> Grossman, M. (2021) 'How has COVID-19 changed the violent extremist landscape?', *CREST Security Review*, Issue 12, 15 October. <https://crestresearch.ac.uk/comment/how-has-covid-19-changed-the-violent-extremist-landscape/>

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arguably bearing a disproportionate pandemic-related burden in terms of disrupted schooling, dwindling or precarious employment, isolation from face to face culturally diversified settings, and mental health and housing challenges. Under these circumstances, the vulnerability of young people – already a generation of digital natives – to the online social harms of violent extremist [and/or] conspiratorial ideologies can intensify.

As a 2019 CVESC study on the reintegration of children and women returning from foreign conflict zones observes, ‘CVE continues to be recognised as a critical means of avoiding the overall securitisation of how nations engage with the prevention of terrorism and violent extremism, particularly in relation to young people’.<sup>103</sup> The broad aims of countering violent extremism centre largely on:

- implementing early prevention, intervention and diversion efforts at pre-criminal thresholds to help avoid or minimise escalation to more serious violent behaviour and its consequences for both community safety and those on radicalisation pathways;
- reducing, challenging or disrupting the influence, appeal and reach of violent extremist narratives and propaganda, and
- addressing individual and community vulnerabilities and strengthening individual and community resilience to offset the likelihood of using violence to cope with grievances, challenges or hardships by providing meaningful and effective coping resources and support.

These aims – alongside the voluntary nature of participation in specific CVE programs – remain important elements of distinction for CVE efforts compared to counter-terrorism strategies that deal with higher risk and often more imminent threat scenarios using a range of invasive investigation and other consequential powers under counter-terrorism legislation. These aims and principles apply regardless of the ideological platforms or ideas subscribed to by those who participate in CVE programs focused on prevention, diversion or disengagement.

In Australia, while a number of government-led CVE frameworks, and the policy and programs underpinning them, have remained for the most part ideologically agnostic – for example, the Commonwealth’s *Living Safe Together* intervention and community awareness framework<sup>104</sup> – some programs at State/Territory level have focused specifically on either far-right extremism, or youth, or both. In New South Wales, the State Government’s COMPACT program<sup>105</sup> includes resources for ideologically agnostic ‘youth-led solutions’ that aim to

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<sup>103</sup> Grossman, M. and Barolsky, V. (2019) *Reintegrating children, women and families returning to Australia from foreign conflict zones: The role of community support*. Research Report for the Countering Violent Extremism Subcommittee, Australia-New Zealand Counter-Terrorism Committee, 31.  
[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/335689572\\_Reintegrating\\_children\\_women\\_and\\_families\\_returning\\_to\\_Australia\\_from\\_foreign\\_conflict\\_zones\\_The\\_role\\_of\\_community\\_support](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/335689572_Reintegrating_children_women_and_families_returning_to_Australia_from_foreign_conflict_zones_The_role_of_community_support)

<sup>104</sup> See [www.livingsafetogether.gov.au](http://www.livingsafetogether.gov.au)

<sup>105</sup> See <https://multicultural.nsw.gov.au/community-resilience/compact/>

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support young people to be upstanders able to ‘stand up’ to and ‘stand united against violent extremism, hate, fear and division’ and to promote community cohesion and the benefits of cultural diversity through a wide variety of engagement measures.

In Victoria, Victoria Police have implemented the NITE program<sup>106</sup> as part of their 2022-2025 Counter-Terrorism Strategy. The NITE (Network for Intervention and Tailored Engagement) program specifically addresses IMVE or Ideologically Motivated Violent Extremism, which encompasses far-right extremism and is used to distinguish this category from RMVE or Religiously Motivated Violent Extremism. (Both these terms were introduced by ASIO in 2021 as official designations to replace the use of terms such as ‘right wing extremism’ and ‘Islamic’ or ‘Islamist extremism’, and rapidly adopted by a number of other federal and state agencies.) The NITE program’s stated goal is providing ‘a pathway towards disengagement for individuals who are either actively engaged, or at risk of engaging, in IMVE...NITE utilises a holistic and multidisciplinary approach towards the disengagement process’ to address both ‘violent ideological beliefs’ and the ‘psychosocial factors which can influence an individual to engage in IMVE’.<sup>107</sup>

There are also targeted online interventions such as the Department of Home Affairs’ ‘Fearlessly Australian’ website and podcast series,<sup>108</sup> which focuses on promoting resilience in relation to tensions around masculinity and Australian identity, a key point of intersection in far-right extremist discourse, as well as past online initiatives such as the youth-focused *The Point Magazine*, supported by Multicultural NSW, which included content focused on anti-hate and CVE topics through articles written by young people across 41 issues until ceasing publication in 2017.<sup>109</sup>

In relation to correctional and community settings focused on those who have already engaged with the justice system, there are programs including the NSW Juvenile Justice package, which offers training to youth justice professionals around identifying young people who may be at risk of involvement in violent extremism, with a direct focus on far-right extremism; the CISP (Victoria) and PRISM (NSW) programs, both of which deal with post-conviction offenders; the NSW Engagement and Support Program (ESP), which focuses on reintegration into society for offenders who may be at risk of, or who have already engaged, in supporting or enacting violent extremism, and the NSW specialist CVE Unit within the youth criminal justice system, which has developed a youth-specific framework for dealing with at-risk and radicalised youth offenders.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Victoria Police (2023) *Victoria Police Counter Terrorism Strategy 2022-2025*. Melbourne: Victoria Police. <https://content.police.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2022-12/CTC-STRATEGY-2022-2025-DIGITAL-OP2.pdf>

<sup>107</sup> Victoria Police (2023), 7.

<sup>108</sup> See <https://fearlesslyaustralian.com.au/>

<sup>109</sup> *The Point Magazine Archive Issues*, <http://www.thepointmagazine.com.au/previous-issues.php>

<sup>110</sup> Barracosa, S. and March, J. (2022) ‘Dealing with radicalised youth offenders: The development and implementation of a youth-specific framework’, *Front. Psychiatry* 12(13 Jan.) <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2021.773545>

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Outside of government-led programming, community-based organisations such as All Together Now, in particular through their CAPE (Community Action for Preventing Extremism) program,<sup>111</sup> have offered programming focused on far-right extremism supported by the NSW State Government from 2016-2020. Related projects by All Together Now such as Agent C, which focuses on challenging conspiracy theories and fake news,<sup>112</sup> and their Countering Far-Right Extremism Training,<sup>113</sup> are still offered. Based in Victoria but operating nationally, the Australian Multicultural Foundation offers youth- and family-focused training and resources focused on cyber-parenting awareness<sup>114</sup> and on community awareness geared towards building resilience to violent extremism, as well as the National Youth Leadership Muster Initiative and the Northern Community Support Group (CSG) in Victoria. A range of other AMF youth-focused programming focuses specifically on young people in specific ethno-cultural communities.

The research base in Australia has investigated protective factors for youth resilience to violent extremism through a comparative study in Australia and Canada,<sup>115</sup> resulting in the development of the BRAVE (Building Resilience to Violent Extremism) standardised measure now used to support youth-focused CVE programming in a wide range of countries, including Australia. It identifies five key domains validated by the research that are meaningful in assessing young people's resilience to violent extremism, particularly for those living in multicultural communities: *cultural identity and connectedness; bridging capital; linking capital; violence-related behaviours*, and *violence-related beliefs*.<sup>116</sup>

Another study has focused on analysis of young people identified as radicalised to violent extremism through the open-source-based PIRA dataset,<sup>117</sup> finding that among this sample poor educational achievement, mental health issues, active online social media engagement, exposure to radicalised peers and networks, triggering events and personal grievances were all factors contributing to youth radicalisation. Channels for recruiting young people into violent extremism by far-right extremist groups and networks have focused on music, clothes, social media and gaming platforms.

The relatively modest evidence base of research conducted on or with Australian young people on issues related to their involvement in violent extremism, and the similarly modest range of youth-focused programs for which public information is available, suggests that while there is strong work being done by government, researchers and civil society

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<sup>111</sup> See <https://alltogethernow.org.au/our-work/far-right-extremism/community-action-for-preventing-extremism-cape/>

<sup>112</sup> See <https://alltogethernow.org.au/our-work/far-right-extremism/agent-c/>

<sup>113</sup> See <https://alltogethernow.org.au/training-and-workshops/far-right-extremism-training/>

<sup>114</sup> See <https://amf.net.au/entry/cyberparent-web-app/>

<sup>115</sup> Grossman, M., Hadfield, K., Jefferies, P., Gerrand, V., Ungar, M. (2020) 'Youth resilience to violent extremism: Development and validation of the BRAVE measure', *Terrorism and Political Violence* 34(3), 468-488. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2019.1705283>

<sup>116</sup> BRAVE Research Tool, 'What is the BRAVE?', <https://brave.resilienceresearch.org/background/>

<sup>117</sup> Cherney, A., Belton, E., Norham, S. A. B., Milts, J. (2022) 'Understanding youth radicalisation: An analysis of Australian data', *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* 14(2), 97-119. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19434472.2020.1819372>

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organisations, there remain significant opportunities to further strengthen frameworks and programming across various sectors to address the specific needs of young people in relation to far-right violent extremist influence and involvement.

Chief amongst these are the role of educational institutions – from primary school through to university – in fostering critical literacy skills<sup>118</sup> to deconstruct and address the mis- and disinformation on which far-right extremist narratives thrive,<sup>119</sup> and the need for clear and accessible resources to which family and friends may turn if they are concerned about a young person’s potential involvement in violent extremist activities or networks – only NSW at present offers a non-securitised channel through their Step Together program<sup>120</sup> to which family, friends and others in the community can turn for advice and support, in contrast to the national Act Early program in the UK.<sup>121</sup>

There is also a need for better understanding the role of ‘kinetic’ violent extremism<sup>122</sup> and its role in appealing to young people. Kinetic violent extremism focuses on the ways in which action modes geared towards momentum and physical engagement through ideologically based networks – from traveling overseas to join foreign conflicts to participating in activities such as fight clubs, gyms, combat training and martial arts, performative street demonstrations, neighbourhood leafletting and other forms of physical engagement – are emerging as key elements for far-right extremist recruitment and mobilisation. While both scholarly and policy attention has rightly focused intensively on the challenges posed by online risks and threats related to radicalisation to or preparation for violence committed by far-right extremist actors and on the narratives that are used to legitimate and inspire action, the kinetic dimensions of recruitment and socialisation into violent extremism, with their emphasis on forms of physical activity and engagement, have been correspondingly overlooked, particularly in relation to young people who may be seeking not only sense of belonging but also sense of efficacy expressed through physical accomplishment, momentum or enhancement as they transition into adulthood.

This raises the question of how we might better incorporate an understanding of the kinetic basis for the appeal of violent extremism to young people into our CVE programming, beyond previous efforts to use sports-based CVE youth programs as a prevention and community engagement mechanism. This has implications as well for how we view youth activism and protest on a range of social issues or grievances, which – rather than being perceived simply as a threat to social order – may actually provide prosocial outlets for both the kinetic and the

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<sup>118</sup> OSCE Secretariat (2021) ‘Critical thinking as a tool against violent extremism’, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, 8 January. <https://www.osce.org/secretariat/475496>

<sup>119</sup> Monaghan, K., Rodriguez, C., Pal, J., White, J. (2023) *Mis- and Disinformation: Extremism in the Digital Age*. London: Counter Terrorism Preparedness Network. <https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2023-12/CTPN%20Report%202023%20-%20Mis-and%20Disinformation%2C%20Extremism%20in%20the%20Digital%20Age%20%28Single%20Pages%29.pdf>

<sup>120</sup> See <https://stepttogether.nsw.gov.au/>

<sup>121</sup> See <https://actearly.uk/>

<sup>122</sup> Grossman, M. (2024) ‘Let’s get physical: Kinetic violent extremism and countering violent extremism – a new framework for CVE programming?’. Research paper under review.

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significance and meaning-seeking<sup>123</sup> impulses of young people when such activity is explicitly non-violent in nature.

**Strategies for addressing young people’s involvement in extremism**

Following are several considerations for thinking about how we might address the involvement of young people in violent extremist ideologies, movements and networks through a CVE lens.

In 2014, ‘Tough is not enough: Ten smarter ways to counter violent extremism’<sup>124</sup> was published in an environment dominated by the rise of Islamic State and the threat this posed not only to national security but to young people who were being influenced and recruited to either travel overseas to fight in then-Islamic State-dominated territories, or to conduct domestic acts of terror at home. Among these were a number of specific policy suggestions that have arguably gained even more resonance in relation to the challenges we now face in relation to far-right extremism and the rising number of young people being influenced by far-right extremist ideas and activities. These suggestions included:

- demystifying violent extremism as a ‘higher form of social action’ that seems to reach beyond the ordinary and the everyday to endow its proponents with special status or powers;
- the more creative and strategic use of social media and narrative challenge exemplified by the use of ‘multimodal communication platforms combining image, text and sound’ to reach young people ‘in the same way that sophisticated violent extremist propaganda routinely achieves’;
- developing young people’s cognitive *and* emotional skills in deconstructing extremist ideology through school- and university-based education to ‘equip young people to evaluate and argue against the interpretations of religion, history, politics and identity that are the bread and butter of terrorist recruitment narratives’, and, critically,
- ensuring that our CVE programs, policies and strategies are based on broad and genuine community relationships that emphasise ‘the central issue of trust’ beyond engagement solely with community leaders.

The article noted the need to move beyond engagement and partnership structures that ‘exclude women, young people and voices of difference or dissent within communities’, since these groups are ‘precisely those we need to engage with if we are to mount credible alternatives to violent extremism’ by listening to and involving communities – and in particular young people – in developing and implementing effective prevention and diversion strategies.

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<sup>123</sup> Kruglanski, A. W., Molinario, E, Jasko, K., Webber, D., Leander, N. P., Pierro, A. (2022) ‘Significance-quest theory’, *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 17(4), 1050-1071. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17456916211034825>

<sup>124</sup> Grossman, M. (2014) ‘Tough is not enough: Ten smarter ways to counter violent extremism’, *The Conversation*, 23 October. <https://theconversation.com/tough-is-not-enough-ten-smarter-ways-to-counter-violent-extremism-32690>

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Ten years later, these points remain salient and may serve as useful benchmarks against which to plot the development of new or modified youth-sensitive approaches to addressing far-right extremism through CVE strategies at a whole of government and whole of community level.

However, it is vitally important to identify who and what we mean by ‘communities’ in the context of far-right extremism. In a recently released analysis, Thomas and Grossman<sup>125</sup> have argued that how CVE practitioners and policymakers work with communities to counter radicalisation to violence can no longer rely on outdated assumptions about ethnoculturally or geographically bounded definitions of ‘community’ in their engagement frameworks. As they observe,

New challenges around conceptualising and defining ‘communities’ are also emerging as problematic in the context of growing XRW [extreme right-wing] threats, albeit in different ways and for different reasons than those associated with the construct of ‘Muslim communities’. These problems include what White (2020: 77) identifies as ‘the disparate nature of “community” often associated with the extreme right wing’. They also include the massive shift towards digital communities of interest that are now more fragmented, fluid and porous (Peucker and Smith, 2019), more loosely structured and volatile in terms of collective identities and group formations (Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies, 2021) and in some cases more indebted to multiple and even contradictory ideological and motivational vectors (Baldino, 2021). ... The emergence of XRW extremism has created new pressures on how Western P/CVE frameworks understand and operationalise the meanings of ‘community’, and on how they envisage the prospects for building ‘community resilience’ to violent extremism when the ‘communities’ in question derive from a (White) majority rather than minority identity group. This suggests that policymakers need to re-think their foregrounding of community both conceptually and practically within P/CVE policies.<sup>126</sup>

Also needed is a clear and comprehensive strategy on youth engagement in relation to violent extremism that a) recognises that ‘youth’ is not a homogenous concept across Australia and b) leverages both federal resources and local networks and capacity across States and Territories that have the capability to work effectively with this diversity. The approach of Public Safety Canada’s *National Strategy on Countering Radicalization to Violence*<sup>127</sup> offers a blueprint for why engaging young people themselves in developing solutions to violent extremist messaging and appeals is a strategic priority, particularly in an environment dominated by digital spaces and their interactions with offline activity:

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<sup>125</sup> Thomas, P. and Grossman, M. (2024) ‘Working with communities to counter radicalisation’ in *The Routledge Handbook on Radicalisation and Countering Radicalisation*, ed. J. Busher, L. Malkki and S. Marsden. London: Routledge, 292-305.

<sup>126</sup> Thomas, P. and Grossman, M. (2024), 296.

<sup>127</sup> See <https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/rsrscs/pblctns/ntnl-strtg-cntrng-rdclztn-vlnc/index-en.aspx>

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Effective engagement with youth is critical to challenging violent extremist and terrorist use of the internet and social media. Young Canadians understand the online environment and how their peers use new and emerging social media platforms. Young Canadians are involved and engaged; they drive and sustain political and social action, and can develop and transmit effective alternative narratives that point to the errors, myths and contradictions in violent extremist and terrorist messaging. Also, they provide prosocial influences for their peers and can steer their energy toward positive political and social endeavours. The Canada Centre prioritizes work with Canadian youth, funds projects to provide a better understanding of the risks faced by youth in the online space, and facilitates engagement between youth and key partners, such as technology companies, researchers and academics. This engagement is meant to provide youth with the resources and capacity to develop and implement evidence-based online prevention initiatives such as alternative narratives and positive messaging.<sup>128</sup>

Finally, it is also important to consider developing shared definitions or consensus on how we define ‘youth’ and ‘young people’ for the purpose of policy and program development in this area. Federal and State/Territory instruments offer different understandings of the age range that categorises young people and minors. Across the Australian Commonwealth, States and Territories, a desktop scan of a selection of recent available documents online relating to youth strategies or other instruments such as legislative acts and strategic plans shows that the age range for ‘young people’ is variously given as:

- *Queensland, Northern Territory, Victoria, South Australia, Commonwealth*: between ages **12 – 25** (Queensland Youth Strategy 2017; Northern Territory Youth Strategy 2023-2033; Victorian Youth Strategy 2022-2027; South Australia Youth Action Plan 2023 consultation; Australian Government Office for Youth)
- *New South Wales*: between ages **12 – 24** (Youth Work NSW) or **0 – 24** (NSW Strategic Plan for Children and Young People 2022-2024)
- *Western Australia*: between ages **10 – 24** (Dept. of Health: early adolescence, 10-14, late adolescence, 15-19, young adulthood, 20-24; At Risk Youth Strategy 2022-2027)
- *Australian Capital Territory*: between ages **12 – 18** (Children and Young People Act 2008)
- *Tasmania*: between ages **0 – 25** (Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy)

However, even within the most commonly adopted age range of 12 – 25 to define ‘young people’, there are major differences in developmental and life-course needs, vulnerabilities, protective factors and capabilities between a 12-year-old, a 16-year-old, and a 20-year-old, for example. These differences are currently flattened out by the all-inclusive use of the term ‘young people’, and greater sophistication and nuance is needed in calibrating engagement, resourcing and support of young people to bolster their ability to resist and challenge efforts to engage them in violent extremist ideas, platforms and actions both online and offline. Our

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<sup>128</sup> Public Safety Canada (2019) *National Strategy on Countering Radicalization to Violence*, 26-27. <https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/rsracs/pblctns/ntnl-strtg-cntrng-rdclztn-vlnc/index-en.aspx>



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CVE strategies need to account for these significant differences across the 'youth' cohort as a whole by drawing on evidence from relevant disciplines and clinical expertise that can assist in this endeavour.

**APPENDIX A**

1. *Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies Submission to the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security (PJCIS) Inquiry into Extremist Movements and Radicalism in Australia, February 2021*
2. *Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies Submission to the Victorian Parliament Legal and Social issues Committee Inquiry into Extremism in Victoria, May 2022*

These two previous submissions by CRIS appear on the following pages and may serve to supplement the material and points made in this submission.



Submission by  
The Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies (CRIS)

to the

Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and  
Security (PJCIS)  
Inquiry into extremist movements and  
radicalism in Australia

February 2021



[www.crisconsortium.org](http://www.crisconsortium.org)  
<https://twitter.com/CRISconsortium>

**Submission by the  
Centre for Resilience and Inclusive Societies (CRIS)**  
to the  
**Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security (PJCIS)**  
**Inquiry into extremist movements and radicalism in Australia**

**February 2021**

**This Submission has been prepared by members of The Centre for Resilience and Inclusive Societies (CRIS).** CRIS is a research and program-based think tank consortium of eight Australian and international academic, community and industry partners – Deakin University, Western Sydney University, Victoria University, the Resilience Research Centre-Dalhousie University (Canada), the Australian Multicultural Foundation (AMF), the Centre for Multicultural Youth (CMY), RAND Australia, and the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) (UK). CRIS was established through a program grant from the State Government of Victoria to deliver research, programs and inform policies that advance and enrich our local, national, and international community cohesion and resilience. We work on a range of related issues including:

- Social polarisation and disengagement from the public sphere.
- The rise of social exclusivist identities based on ethnicity, religion, or culture.
- The influence of global conflicts and tensions on local environments and actors.
- The social harms created when grievances and alienation translate into violent action against specific groups or society at large.

For more information about CRIS and its activities, please see: <https://www.crisconsortium.org/>

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### **General comments**

This review is taking place at a time when the issues it is investigating, particularly in relation to far-right extremism, continue to place ever greater demands on resources in Australia, as they do around the world. A series of public comments by both the Director-General of Security and the Deputy Director, including in the ASIO 2019-20 *Annual Report*, clearly set out ASIO's substantially increased overall counterterrorism caseload and the fact that as much as 40 per cent of this is now taken up with far-right extremism, a proportion that has more than doubled over the past four years. The 15 March 2019 attack by an Australian terrorist in Christchurch was a rude awakening to the fact that far-right terrorism is now no longer a hypothetical, over-the-horizon scenario, but rather a real and immediate threat.

Over the past twelve months, overshadowed by the COVID-19 pandemic and related impacts, there have been multiple indications that changes in the landscape of violent extremism have accelerated. This means that, more than ever, agility and adaptability on the part of Australian counterterrorism policy and countermeasures are required.

The storming of the US Capitol on 6 January 2021 serves as a warning about how conspiracy theory and extremist rhetoric in the virtual realm can manifest as violent extremism in the real world. And the recent show of force by a group of 40 or so men associated with the Australian white supremacist, neo-Nazi group National Socialist Network in the Grampians National Park in rural Victoria, emboldened by public displays of strength by far-right militia in the US, UK and Europe, highlights the volatile nature of Australia's far-right milieu, the increasing threat it poses, and the ways in which events on the other side of the world resonate in Australia.

**The rest of this Submission addresses Terms of Reference 1, 2, 3 (b), 3 (d), 3(e) and 3 (f).**

- 1. The nature and extent of, and threat posed by, extremist movements and persons holding extremist views in Australia, with a particular focus on:**
  - a. the motivations, objectives and capacity for violence of extremist groups including, but not limited to, Islamist and far right-wing extremist groups, and how these have changed during the COVID-19 pandemic, and**
  - b. the risk to the community of high-risk terrorist offenders.**

## **Overview of what we know**

Over the last decade our understanding of what leads people to become radicalised to violent extremism has become much more sophisticated. While there are continuing debates about the antecedents and drivers of radicalisation to violence, nevertheless, some things are now reasonably clear:

### **1) There is no singular terrorist profile**

Violent extremists come from a very wide range of backgrounds. There is no particular national, cultural, ethnic, religious, socio-economic or educational background that predisposes an individual or a group to become vulnerable to or engaged by violent extremist ideology. They are, however, more likely to radicalise in their teens and twenties than at a later age and they are more likely to be male than female. And different kinds of violent extremist groups focus their recruiting and influence operations on different communities. For example, Salafi-jihadi groups such as Islamic State have had greatest success in Australia with recruiting second-generation Muslim migrants, and individuals in extended families with extremist relatives. Far-right extremists, on the other hand, have been dominated by white supremacists and have been predictably more successful in attracting people who identify as being from an Anglo-Saxon or European 'white' background.

### **2) Radicalisation to violence is generally a gradual process**

Whilst some individuals may appear to transition to violent extremist views surprisingly quickly, it is much more common that this process takes place over many months or even years.

### **3) There is no single path or cause**

The path to violent extremism varies with every individual. It typically involves a complex interplay between push and pull factors. The path may sometimes appear to be deliberate, and determined by personal agency, but often it appears to be fortuitous and unfolds through the forming a relationship with other individuals with extremist ideas. Very often it is the case of meeting the wrong person at the wrong

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time, with fateful friendships and exposure to particular kinds of social influence being formed in moments of vulnerability and social or psychological need.

**4) Ideology is important but is not solely determinative**

Ideology may be important to give focus to a sense of grievance against those with power or other groups in society. Nevertheless, relationships and social networks generally precede the adoption of an extremist ideology. The majority of extremists initially have little real, deep knowledge of the political, social or (where relevant) religious doctrines they are ostensibly supporting. With many Islamist extremist recruits, as also with many “Christian Nationalists”, theological knowledge remains very limited, and comes late in the radicalisation process, if at all. More generally, in far-right extremist networks, people quickly develop an understanding of previously unfamiliar concepts such as white genocide, white separatism and National Socialism as they move deeper into their new social network.

**5) The process of radicalisation combines emotional and cognitive processes**

Young people struggling with personal issues such as social isolation, family breakdown, mental health concerns or identity challenges can be particularly vulnerable and in need of support and feeling understood. If they are lonely, confused or frustrated by a lack of purpose and belonging and feel a sense of emptiness in life, some young people seek to fill the gap by turning to criminal gangs, or substance abuse. A few may become susceptible and vulnerable to extremist ideologies that seem to offer rewards that promise to fill the gap with something the individual yearns for or provide an opportunity to be part of a bigger cause, enhancing their sense of identity and social status as a result. Others, however, may find a sense of purpose that makes a positive contribution. The direction in which they go, whether benign or destructive, is often determined by their social networks and influences. A positive role model or mentor in the form of a teacher or sports coach can save a life, just as predatory or simply malign acquaintances can destroy a life. Paradoxically, however, this does not track with self-perception. Rather, most extremists are of the view that they are pursuing a “noble cause” that justifies violence in the name of political, social or religious ends. In many cases these vulnerable individuals are deliberately targeted for extremist grooming and recruitment.

**6) Few apparent links between poverty and violent extremism**

Contrary to common assumptions, there is very limited evidence of significant links between poverty and radicalisation into violent extremism in first-world countries. In Australia in particular, poverty does not appear to be a significant factor. Youth unemployment, however, for a variety of social and psychological reasons, is associated with many of the vulnerabilities to radicalisation outlined above.

**7) Alienation from the broader community**

Feeling alienated from, or not belonging to, mainstream society and the sense of being disconnected, ignored and estranged by the broader community is present in those attracted to both Islamist and right-wing extremism. Islamist extremist narratives actively exploit this, pointing to how Muslims are excluded in Australia and

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the Western world more generally. They are told they do not belong and that they cannot be true citizens. They feel pushed away and as a result alienated from the social and political system. This has been part of the messaging to recruit vulnerable Muslim youth for many years.

Likewise, among white supremacists and other right-wing extremists, “political correctness”, liberal policies (including multiculturalism) and globalisation are experienced as undermining their views about how society should be ordered so that they do not see themselves reflected in mainstream politics or existing institutions. They feel increasingly marginalised, de-valued and left behind. Alienation from the political establishment plays a central role in populist attacks on the status quo (which they claim is run by the left) and provides the emotional and ideological context for white supremacist and extreme right-wing agitation.

**In summary, there are some common predisposing risk factors:**

- a. Personal experiences of real or perceived victimhood or threat to one’s in-group
- b. A feeling of detachment or alienation from wider society
- c. Identification with a cause linked to a perceived victimised community (that community may be local or geographically distant)
- d. Searching for a sense of purpose or a more exciting “mission” that may create a feeling of belonging and agency
- e. Socialisation through family or friends or associates
- f. An ideological message that resonates with individual’s own experiences or pre-existing perceptions

These predisposing risk factors can apply across both genders and age groups. While there is some evidence that more men than women radicalise to violent extremism, women are now featuring more visibly in violent extremist movements in both Islamist and right-wing contexts. Although the age cohort for right-wing extremists is generally slightly older than for Islamist extremists, very young people including children have been radicalised in both contexts as well.

**Recent developments and the impact of COVID-19**

**COVID-19**

It is undoubtedly the case that the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated some of these changes. The US sociologist and emergency management expert Professor Kathleen Tierney has pointed out that a key tenet of social science disaster research is that disasters reveal and amplify both the capabilities and the vulnerabilities of the societies in which they occur. Tierney observes that “the pandemic is exposing the nature of the social fabric and seeking out its weaknesses” (Tierney, 2020).

Recent CRIS research on the Australian environment which has shown that the pandemic has drastically influenced the nature and volume of online messaging of far-right groups and individuals in Australia (Peucker, 2020; Guerin et al., 2020).

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The fact that human social and business life is now substantially carried out online enhances the scope of extremist influences on the internet (Gerrand, 2020). For many terrorist organisations and influencers, the coronavirus pandemic represents an environment that is conducive to their longed-for demise of democratic society. Such actors mobilise through online platforms to deliver and share narratives that foster social division or exclusivism through multimodal content. Efforts to mitigate the social influence of such groups, by removing for example violent extremist content from online platforms and replacing it with pro-social content, are challenged by an emerging ‘crossline’ dynamic of recruitment into violent extremism at the intersection of online engagement and real-world, offline contact (Grossman et al., 2019; Berger et al., 2020).

Similarly, with respect to the current Covid-19 pandemic, a recent German report has observed that:

COVID-19 itself has become fodder for propaganda online. Islamist posts identified by Germany's internet watchdog for children's safety, <https://www.jugendschutz.net/>, have equated the pandemic with punishment from God for sinful behaviour and have prophesized the end of time. Right-wing social media users have also used the crisis to spread conspiracy theories that lockdown measures are the beginning of a dictatorship under Chancellor Angela Merkel. They've also laced pandemic conspiracy theories with anti-Semitic and xenophobic beliefs. (Deutsche Welle, 2021)

**The infodemic**

One of these key trends is the “epidemic of misinformation”, including active disinformation. As the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction-Regional Office for Asia-Pacific outlined in its May 2020 brief, *Risk Communication to Prevent the Spread of COVID-19: Countering the ‘Infodemic’*:

What is different about misinformation surrounding COVID-19 is its scale and speed. Widespread access to mobile internet and social media, two technologies that were not common in past pandemics, have helped fuel the speed by which the misinformation fire has spread. Rumours that originate in one region, quickly appear in repackaged forms in other regions.

The UNDRR further noted that “several weeks into this global crisis, it is also clear that a ‘parallel universe’ of rumour and false information is also active. Its wide reach and ability to influence behaviour could increase health risks and fuel racism and hate. This ‘infodemic’ is a genuine threat to COVID-19 prevention and recovery”.

Unlike simple misinformation that is unwittingly spread, disinformation campaigns deliberately target groups to serve the aims of such extremist organisations. The ASIO 2019-20 *Annual Report* similarly states that “the COVID-19 pandemic has been used by right-wing and issue-motivated extremists to promote their views. They are seeking to exploit social and economic dislocation; and their extremist ideology has been spreading more quickly and widely as Australians spend more time online engaging with like-minded individuals” (ASIO, 2020: 18).



### **Conspiracy theories and extremism**

The trends discussed above are clearly not limited to Australia, but transnational in nature and impact, and they have rapidly coalesced around the escalation and exploitation of narratives that merge more conventional hateful rhetoric with conspiracy theories. The UN Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED) published a Trends Alert in July 2020 explicitly stating that:

Extreme right-wing terrorist groups and individuals have sought to co-opt the pandemic, using some of those conspiracy theories to attempt to radicalize, recruit, and inspire plots and attacks.... Some of those conspiracy theories have appealed to different parts of the extreme right-wing spectrum, while existing conspiracy theories have been repurposed by recycling prejudices and narratives to fit the crisis.... Extreme right-wing groups have reframed a long-standing racialized and misogynistic narrative – the perceived threat of cultural annihilation and the elimination of the ethnocultural identities of European people – in light of COVID-19. Anti-migrant, anti-Semitic, anti-Asian, racist and xenophobic tropes have been at the forefront of COVID-19-related conspiracies. (UN Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate [CTED], July 2020)

Similarly, in 2019, a widely reported upon FBI document made the assessment that conspiracy theories “very likely will emerge, spread, and evolve in the modern information marketplace in the near term...occasionally driving both groups and individual extremists to carry out criminal or violent acts” (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2019).

Conspiracy theories have always been part of extremist narratives. As the leading extremism researcher J. M. Berger has pointed out, “conspiracy theories are also cumulative, in the sense that someone who subscribes to one is likely to subscribe to more than one” (Berger 2018a: 87).

A recent research study by CRIS member Dr Mario Peucker on far-right mobilisation in the Australian context found that conspiratorial thinking within far-right groups is related not only to ideological factors (the content of the conspiracy theory) but also has psychological and social dimensions related to the networking enabled by participating in conspiracy theory online communities. Individuals influenced by conspiratorial views, such as those associated with QAnon, tend to feel empowered by ‘doing their own independent research’ and finding what they consider the ‘real truth’. This has given them the recognition, respect and control they were seeking, while at the same time building a sense of belonging to a small community of red-pilled truth-seekers, in opposition to the “brainwashed” mainstream and a corrupt political elite, controlled by a secretive global cabal (Peucker, 2020b; Peucker, et al., 2020).

One of the key issues with current policy settings on violent extremism in Australia is that because they grew out of a historical pattern of terrorist attacks linked to Islamist violent

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extremism, coupled with no recent large-scale far-right terrorist incidents, insufficient attention was paid to far-right extremism until the Christchurch attack of March 2019.

Yet when viewed from a longer-term, global perspective, far-right extremist violence is much more common than many have thought. Over much of the past century, the most violent of racially charged, conspiracy-based extremist movements have been Nazism and other forms of fascism. The foundation of the modern study of violent extremism started with the work of those involved in the de-Nazification of Germany and Austria after World War II. Professor Norman Cohn's writings such as *Europe's Inner Demons* and his work on the fabricated "Protocols of the Elders of Zion" *Warrant for Genocide* (1967) revealed the persistence of certain conspiracy theories over many centuries, including the fake "Protocols of the Elders of Zion", the idea of 'the end of days', and focus on child sacrifice and abuse.

Cohn's book *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1957) is a seminal study of the history of revolutionary millenarianism. Its last line continues to resonate today: "For it is the simple truth that, stripped of their original supernatural sanction, revolutionary millenarianism and mystical anarchism are still with us" (Cohn, 1970 [1957]: 286). This was criticised by some when it was first published because of the view that Cohn was too pessimistic and that the defeat of Nazism and its "1000-year Reich" had ushered in a world finally freed from hateful irrationally and extremism politics. Recent events have, unfortunately, shown Cohn to be right.

This is not purely of academic interest. Many of these elements of conspiracy are now being newly revived, for instance, by the QAnon cult, which is directly linked to extreme violence in the USA. It is directly linked to older yet enduring conspiracy theories, leading Stanton to state: "QAnon's conspiracy theory is a rebranded version of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. QAnon purveys the fantasy that a secret Satan-worshiping cabal is taking over the world. Its members kidnap white children, keep them in secret prisons run by paedophiles, slaughter, and eat them to gain power from the essence in their blood" (Stanton, 2020).

Even though a number of the predictive elements that form a core part of QAnon narratives have not come to pass (for example, the 'Great Awakening' on the day of President Joe Biden's inauguration in January 2020), the fact that events like this ultimately did not occur does not dent the inherent resilience and capacity of conspiracy theories, since adaptation and the capacity for reinvention is part of what makes them such an insidious threat (Silverman, 2021).

These trends are having a direct impact on Australian discourse in the public sphere. Recent research by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) demonstrates that Australia represents the fourth most active country for Twitter discussion of QAnon between October 2017 – June 2020, after the United States, UK, and Canada. Although the volumes of conversation were small in comparison to countries like the United States (Australia only accounted for roughly 1.5% of QAnon conversation globally), this research found some evidence that discussion of the theory was growing in Australia (Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2020b).

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Conspiracy theories may seem to be so irrational and lie so far outside of mainstream norms as to be limited to a relatively inconsequential “fringe” of anti-vaxxers or protests about mask-wearing. But survey data suggest broader acceptance than might be imagined. According to a May 2020 Essential Research poll, 20% of Australian respondents agreed that the ‘number of COVID-19 deaths have been exaggerated by the media and government to scare the population’; 13 per cent believe that Bill Gates played a role in the creation and spread of COVID-19; and the same proportion agreed with the statement that the ‘virus is not dangerous and is being used to force people to get vaccines’. The latter two beliefs are even more prevalent among younger cohorts (20% amongst those aged 20-34 years) (Peucker, 2020a).

As noted above, the storming of the US Capitol on 6 January 2021 vividly illustrates what experts have been arguing for some time: conspiracy theories directly feed violent extremism and consequently can be an important factor in tearing apart the fabric of our society and trust in the institutions of government and civil society, including the media, education and public health.

**No significant threats of violence from radical left-wing groups and movements**

New CRIS research on far-left groups in Australia (with a focus on Victoria) has quantitatively and qualitatively analysed online messaging on social media. This research outlines findings from an analysis of the far-right and far-left Facebook ecosystem in Australia in the first seven months of 2020. It analyses how the far-right and far-left discuss each other on Facebook and how narratives about the other side of the political spectrum shape the online activity of these groups. It also seeks to understand how central discussion about the “other side” is to the far-right and far-left, and how this fits within the broader online activities of these movements. The analysis was conducted between 1 January – 31 July 2020 and looked at 43 far-right and 31 far-left Facebook pages, as well as seven far-right and two far-left public groups. The report can be downloaded from this link: [The+Interplay+Between+Australia+Political+Fringes+final.pdf\(squarespace.com\)](#)

Key findings from this report underscore the core ideological convictions of far-left groups identified previously by international research: their radical opposition to capitalism, imperialism, and fascism, and their uncompromising criticism of government, media, police, and any other institution they see as being complicit in the persistence of the capitalist system and the injustices it allegedly produces. But beyond this stark opposition, nothing in the findings of this study suggests that radical (or extreme) left movements in Australia currently pose a significant security threat.

The qualitative analysis found a significant number of posts on these radical left Facebook pages that called for action in the offline world. These were almost entirely related to non-violent actions, such as participating in a racial justice rally, organising local community help during the health crisis, or putting up anti-fascist stickers (and covering fascist stickers). Overall, the analysis of the randomly selected posts illustrated that explicit calls for physical violence against representatives of the far-right were absent in the posts and very rare in the comments (Peucker, M. and Davey, J., 2020).

**Conclusion**

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Right-wing, white supremacist and neo-Nazi extremism are not new. They never went away and are now re-emerging into prominence. We must remember that bizarre conspiracy theories and horn-helmeted insurgents are not just an inconsequential side show. The Holocaust, one of the greatest slaughters of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was built on similar “blood libels”, racial hatred and conspiracies. While Islamist-inspired violent extremism must remain a focus, government policy needs to be reimagined to address the full continuum of ideologically based violent extremism. The focus on the “War on Terror” and the language around the terrorism of the last 20 years being part of an ethno-religiously framed “clash of civilisations” has meant that the pull factors that are common to all forms of violent extremism across the ideological spectrum – sense of grievance and victimisation chief amongst them – have not been given sufficient weight. Government policy needs to make combatting this the central part of a revised approach to preventing and countering violent extremism.

**2. The geographic spread of these extremist movements and persons in Australia, and their links to international extremist organisations.**

The Global Terrorism Index shows a substantial recent increase in white supremacy/right-wing extremist (RWE) terror attacks and victims. It states:

In North America, Western Europe, and Oceania, far-right attacks increased by 320 per cent over the past five years. This trend has continued into 2019, with 77 deaths attributed to far-right terrorists to September 2019. The number of arrests linked to right-wing terrorism in Europe in 2019 increased for the third year in a row. (Institute for Economic and Peace, Global Terrorism Index, 2019)

While the escalation and distribution of right-wing extremist and white supremacist narratives and attacks has undoubtedly grown during this period, there is an implicit assumption in the Terms of Reference that the spread of such extremism is overwhelmingly linked to “extremist organisations” and that these organisations are coherent structures. Whilst traditionally structured terrorist organisations do exist, geographic spread is facilitated by the fact they are increasingly take the form of loosely structured and often fluid virtual groups.

In Australia, even more so than in North America and Europe, far-right extremism is not generally characterised by organisational structures. It is instead based on the leaderless resistance model (a US military intelligence concept from the 1960s re-popularised by white nationalist Louis Beam in the 1980s), denoting a framework of small, disparate cells and many loosely connected individuals, online communities and connections that occasionally spill into the offline world. There are exceptions to this model, however, such as the neo-Nazi National Socialist Network [NSN] (combining offshoots from the former Lads Society and Antipodean Resistance groups), which is organised and is particularly active in Victoria.

In terms of the global connectedness of Australia’s far right, Berger’s Twitter study showed that Australia’s far-right groups and networks are particularly well connected globally and very prolific; several neo-Nazi (mainly accelerationist) youth groups were formed on the Iron March platform (2011-2017), including Atomwaffen Division (USA) and Antipodean Resistance (Australia; now subsumed within the National Socialist Network). Indeed, Berger found that when it came to **international white supremacy**, “although American content prevailed in the network, several clusters reflected geographic nodes outside the United States. The largest of these was Australian, where there was no language barrier to inhibit the formation of social connections” (Berger, 2018b).

These findings are reinforced by a recent Australian study showing that “internationally, Australian RWE groups have shown the desire and ability to link with their compatriots abroad, particularly in North America (including Canada), the United Kingdom, and

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Europe. Connectivity has been established online and through limited travel. Key individuals also draw on wider international trends for inspiration and support” (Macquarie University, 2020: 21).

This ties into a broader trend of internationalisation amongst right wing extremists, with similar trends being observed in Canadian, American, British, Australian, New Zealand, German and French communities through research by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue. This internationalisation is intimately linked to the mass use of social media platforms as the central organisational infrastructure by RWE groups. As ISD notes, “Far-right ideas have increasingly spread across borders. Ideas originating from the French far-right movement Nouvelle Droite, such as the ‘the great replacement’, ‘metapolitics’, ‘Identitarianism’ or ‘ethnopluralism’, have been adopted by the American ‘alt-right’ over the past decade, and inspired acts of terrorism across the globe, from New Zealand to the US, Germany and Norway” (Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2020a). It also ties more broadly into the spread of conspiracy theories such as ‘White genocide’ conspiracy theories, which centralise the notion of an international struggle between white and non-white people at the heart of right-wing extremist activity.

These trends are clearly reflected in Australia. Membership numbers in the Australian subgroup on the social networking site Gab have increased significantly in recent months, in the context of the US presidential elections in November 2020 and especially in the aftermath of the January 2021 Capitol insurrection riots. While the QAnon conspiracy and symbols such as the Confederate flag used by white supremacists and other far-right extremists in the US have no direct connection with the Australian environment, the internationalisation of extremism means that foreign iconography quickly finds traction in Australian extremist circles. The irony of this was recognised by President Bush’s former advisor, David Frum, who tweeted: “Shouldn’t Australian ‘anti-globalists’ invent their own domestic lunatic theories, rather than importing cheap foreign-made lunatic theories from the United States?” (<https://twitter.com/davidfrum/status/1259543327030095872?lang=en>)

These developments are evidence of how strongly influential international developments in general, and in the US in particular, have gained traction in local domestic terms, particularly in Victoria and Queensland, based on ASIO’s reported far-right extremism caseload (Christodoulou, 2020).

## Conclusion

The symbols, language and ideas supporting these more recent varieties of violent extremism are now internationalised to an unparalleled extent, traversing and exceeding our ideas about what constitute national borders, at least in the virtual realm. Tropes and conspiracy theories which logically have no connection to Australia are picked up and absorbed, either domesticated with localised nuance or alternatively inflated to global proportions. This reinforces the earlier point that Governments need to understand the emotional as well as the cognitive pull of these ideas, involving the strategic provocation and manipulation of fear, anxiety, resentment, uncertainty and rage. This goes beyond the work of intelligence agencies and law enforcement. The use of logical argument, rational-based persuasion and straightforward counter-narratives are not enough, and further work on tackling the socio-psychological dimensions of

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these phenomena must be included as part of the strategic approach to mitigating the impacts of such trends.

Australia has not yet reached the stage we now see unfolding in the USA, where divisions in society and sources of information are so deeply entrenched that there is no longer broad meaningful dialogue or acceptance of what constitutes truth or reality. However, the speed and manner in which conspiracy theories, right-wing extremist ideologies and polarising narratives have travelled – similar to the movement of violent Islamist ideologies, narratives and iconography following the rise of Islamic State a few years previously – requires a reset of government policies. We need to understand fully how and why these emergent trends have such pull and traction, and work on the underlying issues that give them acceptance with a small but vocal section of Australian society that has the capacity to become disproportionately influential relative to their actual numbers.

**3(b) Changes that could be made to Australia's Counter-Terrorism Strategy in relation to preventing radicalisation to extremist views, including the capacity for further partnership approaches with state, territory and local governments.**

**Updating the 2015 Strategy**

In 2015 the Council of Australian Governments published a high-level strategy on counter-terrorism. It was comprehensive at the time, but much has happened since then. The comments by the Director-General of Security in February 2020 make it clear that there needs to be a restatement about the best approaches to countering violent extremism, community engagement and building community resilience.

One of the most significant developments identified by the Director-General of Security was that of the increasing threat of far-right extremism: “Intolerance based on race, gender and identity, and the extreme political views that intolerance inspires, is on the rise across the western world in particular. Right-wing extremism has been in ASIO’s sights for some time, but obviously this threat came into sharp, terrible focus [in 2019] in New Zealand” (ASIO, 2020a).

The 2015 Strategy was broadly constructed to cover the key issues needed to understand, and develop policy on, the terrorist risks and threats. It was based on five core elements which continue to remain current but nevertheless require substantial updating in terms of policy and application:

- Challenging violent extremist ideologies
- Stopping people from becoming terrorists
- Shaping the global environment
- Disrupting terrorist activity within Australia
- Effective response and recovery

Since 2015 the nature of the terrorist threat has evolved and understanding what is, and is not, effective in countering violent extremism has become more sophisticated. There is now an opportunity to cover these matters more directly in a revised Strategy.

In 2015 the Strategy’s focus was primarily on ISIL, AQ and on those within Australia inspired by these groups. There was only passing reference to terrorism by other groups. Clearly, a new strategy needs to be updated to reflect the changing global security context – in particular, the end of the ISIL “caliphate”, the rise of increased white supremacist and far-right extremist movements, and the importance of online influence, misinformation and disinformation, particularly in relation to how this relates to real-world violent action.

**Delineating boundaries between violent extremism and legitimate dissent**

Nevertheless, regardless of the seriousness of these trends, the number of individuals



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across Australia whose beliefs and actions threaten other people's free exercise of their democratic rights and freedoms is small. Ideologically motivated violence is usually based on a view that there is only one 'good' or 'right' way to live often including a belief that one race, ethnicity or religion is 'better' than another. For these reasons, an updated Strategy also needs to emphasise two other points:

- The evidence confirms that violent extremism is not a problem of whole communities in our society, but rather that of a small number of individuals and their personal networks.
- Protestors are not terrorists. Civil disobedience actions can cause significant disruption to Australians. However, there should be no false equivalence between issues-based protest activities of whatever type and either extreme right-wing activity or Islamist-inspired threats of violence.

**Effective prevention**

Over the last five years there has been considerable research and experience on what governments and civil society can do to prevent terrorism. The sections on "Challenging violent extremist ideologies" and "Stopping people from becoming terrorists" need to be updated to reflect this more sophisticated understanding.

When it comes to targeting vulnerabilities, we know that extremist ideologies often offer false promises, solutions and rewards or a sense of purpose and belonging that appear to address real or perceived grievances and fill the lack of purpose and belonging.

There needs to be greater focus on the demography of violent extremists in Australia. Terrorism in Australia is still overwhelmingly a young male activity. While there is evidence of some change in this around the world and an increasing number of women drawn to extremism and RWE drawing older adherents. There is a strong connection with the identity of some young males and the pull factors evident in joining a group that gives them a sense of superiority and entitlement. This links with subtext content found in both ISIL-inspired and RWE propaganda which appeals to racial and religious exclusivism and male superiority.

We have learnt much about how to challenge violent extremist ideology more effectively. It is not enough to simply rebut extremist claims. Extremist groups tend to appeal to emotions and vulnerabilities through sophisticated multi-modal campaigning that blends on and offline (or crossline) approaches. The strategy needs to be more explicit on addressing these emotional elements, grievances and underlying vulnerabilities. Well-crafted tracts on the fallacy of extremist views and on the virtues of democracy are not enough. And they may, fact, even be counter-productive.

**Definition of terrorism**

Terrorism is a tactic used to achieve an extreme political, religious or ideological goal. Not all violence is inspired by extremism and not all extremists support violence as a means of advancing their views. We need to make sure that the internationally recognised definitions of terrorism, which include an ideological or political goal, are not

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watered down. The nature of terrorism and violent extremism is that there is an “in group” and an “out group” (which is usually most of the rest of the world). This type of exclusivism is key, and it would be a grave error to extend the definition to include:

- extreme violence that has no ideological agenda; or
- extreme political agendas that whilst being radical in their aspirations do not advocate the use of terrorist tactics to achieve them.

**Words matter: Care in terminology**

The revised Strategy needs to be very careful in the language it uses. In 2018 the Canadian Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness made a statement about commonly used terminology in relation to descriptors such as ‘Sikh’, ‘Shia’ and ‘Sunni’:

While this terminology has been in use for many years, that does not mean it is sufficient or precise enough. Therefore, I have asked officials to conduct a review and make the appropriate changes to the language used throughout the government to describe extremism. Words matter. We must never equate any one community or entire religions with extremism. (Public Safety Canada, 2018)

This extends not only to well-established dis-ease with how Islamist violent extremism has been characterised in policy terms, but also increasing concern and confusion about what we mean by right-wing extremism. The Canadian *Terrorist Threat to Canada* report includes a useful definition of what it calls right-wing extremism, which it describes as:

traditionally driven by hatred and fear, and includes a range of individuals, groups, often online communities, that back a wide range of issues and grievances, including, but not limited to anti-government and anti-law enforcement sentiment, advocacy of white nationalism and racial separation, anti-Semitism and Islamophobia, anti-immigration, male supremacy (misogyny) and homophobia. (Public Safety Canada, 2019: 8)

It is important to have a clear definition to address the concerns raised in some quarters that the term “right-wing extremism” poses the risk of demonising all those who hold conservative or ‘right-wing’ political views. Such a concern is not well-founded given contemporary understandings of what constitutes “extremism” (Berger, 2018). Nevertheless, a definition like this can help make clear that right-wing extremism requires the holding of *extreme* views that move beyond merely being ‘conservative’ to an explicitly exclusionary and at times anti-democratic embrace of racial, ethnic or religious exclusion or anti-government sentiment.

For this reason, some prefer to use the term ‘far-right extremism’ instead, while in the United States, the term ‘right wing’ has been avoided altogether in recent times, instead drawing on the nomenclature of ‘racially and ethnically motivated violent extremism’ (REMVE) alongside the term ‘targeted violence; (TV) to describe the same phenomenon (Department of Homeland Security, 2019).

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Whatever terms are chosen, clarifying the terminology we use in the Strategy to describe and address the extremism of the far right will be helpful in the same way that critiques of the way in which the term “Islamic” extremism has permitted the populist vilification of the whole of Islam have led to the preferred use of the term ‘Islamist’, which more accurately describes a political ideology harnessed to a particular interpretation of religious doctrine.

**Community resilience**

The 2015 Strategy includes a small section acknowledging the important of resilience. The Strategy states: “The Australian community’s resilience is important to everything we do to counter terrorism. Building and maintaining our resilience allows us to push back against terrorists’ attempts to intimidate us and undermine social cohesion” (COAG, 2015: vi).

There is a longer section under “stopping people from becoming terrorists” on social cohesion in the context of addressing the drivers of radicalisation. But it neglects to explain exactly what resilience means in the context of violent extremism. The Strategy needs to clearly define the twin contexts of resilience to violent extremism, first in relation to its function as resistance or prevention, and then its role in recovery from terrorist incidents (Grossman, 2021).

We know that connected communities are resilient communities because they are more ready to look after each other in times of crisis, including an incident of violent extremism. They function reliably and well whilst under stress; successfully adapt; are self-reliant; and have high levels of social support, social cohesion and social capacity. These social support systems include neighbourhood connections; family and kinship networks; intergenerational supports; good links between communities, institutions and services; and mutual self-help groups (Council of Australian Governments, 2011).

Therefore, building resilient communities is important because they are more likely to adapt in positive and healthy ways to changes or challenges in economic or social circumstances. Australia’s social resilience is, to a large extent, strengthened by the diversity and strength of all its various individual and community links and relationships. Division between people, or groups in our communities, reduces the diversity and strength of our networks, weakens our social cohesion, and limits our ability to adapt proactively to change and unexpected events (Victorian Government, 2015).

We are dealing with a set of complex issues that are inter-connected and can be difficult to fully understand. Therefore, drawing on broad expertise and creating a range of initiatives which are locally owned and led by communities is critical. Initiatives driven by governments alone will not succeed, nor will any approaches that are solely driven from the ‘top down’.

**Role of local government and civil society in preventing violent extremism:  
Strengthening protective factors**

A recent study of far-right dynamics in three local municipalities in Victoria explored the issue that actions of far-right groups and individuals take place in a specific local context,

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but research has thus far paid little attention to the local dynamics and mobilisation attempts offline. The report concluded: “While local councils can play a role in directly responding to far-right actions, their main strength in their everyday operation lies in the area of prevention. This includes: (a) adopting policies and tailored programs aimed at promoting social inclusion, diversity and positive intergroup relations; (b) consistent messaging around the council’s support for social justice, equity and inclusion; and (c) managing conflicting community expectations and values, and allowing, or even encouraging, expressions of dissent. The latter seems underdeveloped in local governments’ community cohesion strategies” (Peucker et al., 2020).

The report also observed that “a particularly underestimated and underutilised approach in preventing far-right extremism (PVE) in Australia revolves around the activation of civil society. Local community organisations and community figures are often well placed to help shift local far-right dynamics by activating a broader grassroots response that challenges the far-right messaging and their claims of speaking for a ‘silent majority’” (Peucker et al., 2020).

### **Recovery**

Australian society is currently focussed on the personal, community and economic recovery from bushfires and the consequences of COVID-19. Within Australia there has been little work on how we would recover from a major terrorist event. The focus taken in responses by authorities is clearly important. Learning from the current crises, we can better prepare for the social and economic consequences of a terrorist act. Clearly the major consequences are the death and injuries and long-term effects on survivors caused by the violence of an act of terrorism.

There are, however, other consequences that also need to be considered. It has often been observed that following terrorist incidents in Australia and overseas, minority groups in Australia suffer significant vilification. The racial vilification of the Chinese community because of COVID-19 is a similar occurrence. We know one of the main aims of terrorists is to drive communities further apart. Furthermore, there can be significant economic disruption, often medium to long term, arising from terrorist incidents. The 2015 Strategy section on recovery really focusses on short-term relief. An updated Strategy needs more emphasis on the issues of longer term social and economic recovery, including how joint action by government and communities can help hold society together at times of shock and stress and help develop and sustain more resilient communities.

**3(d) Further steps that the Commonwealth could take to disrupt and deter hate speech and establish thresholds to regulate the use of symbols and insignia associated with terrorism and extremism, including online, giving consideration to the experience of other countries.**

In 2020, CRIS published two reports dealing with the problem of hate: *Tackling Hate in Australia: Stocktake report 2019-2020* (by Dr Matteo Vergani and Mr Rouven Link) and *Barriers to Reporting Hate Crime and Hate Incidents in Victoria* (by Dr Matteo Vergani and Dr Carolina Navarro). The following considerations mainly emerge from these two reports.

**Hate, hateful extremism and violent extremism**

Whilst strong and even radical belief systems and convictions may not in themselves constitute a problem, the promotion of hatred, intolerance and sectarian sentiment is certainly a problem wherever it manifests. Therefore, it is not only violent extremism, narrowly defined, that is of vital concern, but also that of hate and hateful extremism more broadly defined.

Violent and hateful extremism covers a broad spectrum, ranging from individuals espousing bigoted and hateful views at one end through to terrorism at the other. Using this more encompassing term of VHE is not meant to imply that hateful extremism automatically or inevitably leads to violent extremism. Hateful extremism and hate speech/action does not necessarily involve links to violent extremist social networks or movements but it does engage in similar rhetoric with respect to identifying in groups and out groups as well as similar expressions of hatred and intolerance. Resonances and synergies exist between the two kinds of extremism and there are similar drivers and common elements in the required responses to both occasions.

While relatively few of the individuals who engage in hate speech and hate crimes are likely to progress to violent extremism, there does appear to be good evidence that the growth of hateful extremism makes it easier for those recruiting for violent extremist networks and promoting their narratives to find space to operate in society with less constraint (Braddock, 2019,2020).

Thus, whilst it is not the business of governments or civil society actors to try and police what somebody thinks or believes, it is nevertheless appropriate to intervene when hatred, bigotry and sectarianism are being openly promoted by engaging in prevention strategies to mitigate the adoption of hateful beliefs. This is now relatively well understood when it comes to misogynistic and sexist narratives. And indeed, very often hateful extremism does involve both misogynistic and sexist narratives, alongside racism and other forms of hateful discrimination that treats the other as less than fully human.

Addressing hateful extremism is consistent with working towards sustainable, multilevel

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and inclusive approaches to supporting communities to become more socially cohesive, peaceful and resilient. Community engagement is likely to be both more effective and more widely supported if it is framed around a broad understanding of violent and hateful extremism (VHE), rather than framed more narrowly in terms of violent extremism (VE), enabling wider discussion of these issues across a broader cross-section of communities.

It is generally recognised that when children and young people grow up in an environment poisoned by hateful and bigoted attitudes and behaviour, they are both damaged and more likely to damage others (Mattei & Gyte, 2019). Where there is ongoing violence in communities, or where the long shadow of violence hangs over communities recovering after conflict, addressing attitudes, speech and behaviours that fall short of violence but nevertheless run parallel to the narratives of violent extremists becomes imperative.

Hateful extremism refers to a shared radical belief system, and attendant core narratives, that frames the world in 'us' and 'them' terms that justifies, propagates and incites hate towards members of certain out groups. Violent extremism inevitably involves hate but hateful extremism does not necessarily involve physical violence. The system of radical belief involved in hateful extremism distinguishes it from unthinking, instinctual, and often highly personalised hate. This is what Berger refers to as 'pedestrian hate' (Berger, 2018a). Consequently, some hate crimes appear to be primarily the product of personal malice and prejudice, whereas hate crimes involving hateful extremism are justified in terms of a shared radical belief system.

One of the most common forms of hateful extremism is toxic nationalism that involves not just pride in one's nation, or people, but is dependent upon the hatred of others. White supremacism is a common form of toxic nationalism that invariably involves hateful extremism and has the potential to descend into violent extremism. Toxic nationalism takes different forms around the world; Hindutva extremism in India and Islamophobic, anti-Rohingya Burmese nationalism in Myanmar are but two examples (Lowe, D., 2020; Mills et al., 2017; Vergani, 2020a; Vergani, 2020b.)

Hateful extremism contributes to the normalisation of violence and the perpetuation of structural violence. This sometimes manifests as, and contributes to, violent extremism but it also takes the form of hateful speech, acts and beliefs. By framing the issue in terms of violence and hateful extremism more broadly, alongside a careful discussion of violent extremism more specifically, the simplistic view of violent extremism as simply being an Islamic issue imported from the Middle East can be challenged, an approach that accords well with Australia's emphasis on 'ideological agnosticism' in combatting violent extremism right across the ideological spectrum.

Even when hateful extremism does not manifest as violent extremism, it often shares similar narrative elements. These malign narrative elements of intolerance, dehumanisation, and othering need to be addressed wherever they are found. This requires consistent engagement with counter-narrative elements, best understood and applied in terms of a positive alternative narrative. This positive alternative narrative emphasises peace and conflict resolution, the building of social cohesion, and resilience

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in the development of human potential. It is particularly relevant to working with young people, and it must inevitably be concerned with questions of gender and the empowerment of women and girls.

**Inconsistencies in defining, collecting and analysing hate speech and hate incidents**

A critical part of identifying and addressing hateful extremism lies in being able to accurately diagnose the extent and type of hateful extremist rhetoric that is circulating within and between communities. While there is enormous variation in the definitions of hate speech, they all fundamentally refer to the expression of hatred toward particular people and groups, which implicitly or explicitly stigmatises these people or groups as ‘other’ and depicts them as undesirable and a legitimate object of hostility.

When hate speech is regulated by criminal law, it overlaps with the concept of hate crime, which indicates any crime motivated in whole or in part by bias. When hate speech is not regulated by law, it overlaps with the concept of hate incident, which indicates any non-criminal malicious act that is motivated in whole or in part by bias. There is an exceptional diversity of terms used to capture hate speech, which ranges from concepts adopted by specific legislative texts (e.g., vilification, abuse, hate conduct) to community-specific terms (e.g., Islamophobia, antisemitism, homophobia, transphobia, misogyny, etc.) (Fortuna & Nunes, 2018; Bilewicz & Soral, 2020).

CRIS’s Matteo Vergani, in collaboration with Rouven Link, conducted the first-ever study to scope all organisations working on tackling hate in Australia. The report identified a total of 222 government and non-government organisations working in this area. It also found a significant diversity in how various organisations understand, define, measure and target their work to tackling hate. (Vergani & Link, 2020), which can make coordinated national strategies to reduce the incidence of hate speech and hate incidents difficult to design and implement.

Vergani and Link also found that the lack of available data on hate crimes and incidents hinders the research and policy to tackle hate. Australia data collection about hate speech and hate crime is piecemeal and insufficient. Existing data is scattered across a diverse group of disconnected organisations (including law enforcement agencies, technology companies, governmental commissions and agencies, civil society organisations) which use different criteria and do not share their data.

Currently in Australia, police data is the only official record of hate crime. Such databases might include criminal acts of hate speech such as online threats, but this kind of information is collected only in a few Australian states, and data quality is limited due to significant recording and coding inconsistencies and biases. The Australian Bureau of Statistics does provide some comparative statistics on crime in Australia, but not by motivation, which is a missed opportunity to collect longitudinal information about the incidence of hate speech and hate crimes.

There is also significant under-reporting of hate speech (especially when it comes to reporting to law enforcement agencies), which is caused by barriers such as lack of trust and language barriers, among others (Vergani & Navarro, 2020). All laws that regulate

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hate crime in Australia have been criticised for having a threshold of proof that is too high, which is demonstrated by the very low number of people convicted for crimes related to hate speech.

The inconsistency and diversity of legislation that seeks to address different forms of hate across Australian state also present barriers to reporting. Some laws only protect specific characteristics and not others. For example, the Victorian *Racial and Religious Tolerance Act* (RRTA) 2001 only protects religious and racial minorities, but not other minority groups subject to hate speech, hate crimes and other forms of hate targeting, such as LGBTIQ+ identities who are increasingly targeted by far-right extremists (Mason et al., 2017).

Some States have laws that are unique to their jurisdictions and not shared by other States or Territories. For example, in 2018, New South Wales introduced legislation with no parallel in other States and Territories, the *Crimes Amendment (Publicly Threatening and Inciting Violence) Bill 2018*, which outlaws publicly threatening or inciting violence towards a person or a group on the grounds of race, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, intersex or HIV/AIDS status.

The lack of data and the absence of a consistent and harmonised legislative framework across various Australian states limits the ability of Australian Governments at both Commonwealth and State or Territory level to tackle hate speech and its consequences. Therefore, there is an urgent need for legislation reform and for the creation of robust national systems of data collection that enhance and integrate different sources of data, including from both governmental and non-governmental organisations.

The analysis of legislation and data collection systems adopted by other countries, in particular the United States and the UK, can offer guidance to Australian legislators. It is important to highlight that while both the US and the UK have stronger current legislation and systems on these issues in place than does Australia, Government should not merely seek to follow uncritically the US or UK models. Instead, it should consult meaningfully with Australian communities and stakeholders to identify those mechanisms that are most suited to our national, community and local contexts.

More responsive legislation and stronger systems of data collection and consistency in recording and coding will make it easier for victims and practitioners to navigate the system. It will help Australian Governments at all tiers in tackling hate speech and its well-known social and psychological disruptive impacts for the community, and it will allow a clearer understanding of the relationship between hate speech and other hate-motivated behaviours such as hate crime and terrorism.

In turn, this can assist in developing early-warning systems of real-world violence based on real-time detection of online hate speech. More robust and consistently defined and collected data can also be useful in informing community awareness and education projects, as well as victim support services and responses to incidents.



**3 (e) Further steps the Commonwealth could take to reinforce social cohesion, counter violent extremism and address the growing diversification of extremist ideology in Australia.**

**Social cohesion and violent extremism**

As the foregoing discussion of hateful extremism suggests, without establishing, maintaining and strengthening social cohesion, there is little hope of preventing violent extremism. Social cohesion at its root means fostering increased connection, understanding and solidarity between people from different backgrounds, faiths and traditions in pursuit of common goals around social wellbeing and thriving.

As a **concept**, ‘social cohesion’ asks us to think about and practice what it is that helps us live and work together toward shared goals of social wellbeing despite our differences, rather than allowing those differences to divide us. As a **value set**, ‘social cohesion’ asserts that the benefits of ‘sticking together’ in a community or society are more important, and bring greater satisfaction, rewards and security, than focusing on what sets us apart from each other. As a **practice**, ‘social cohesion’ requires that we make the conscious effort to accept and work with, and through, our social and cultural differences in order to find and nurture the common ground we share. For example, this common ground might revolve around the distribution of social goods, or about how our societies should be governed, or about how vulnerable, disadvantaged or minority members of our communities should be treated by various institutions and systems.

At all three levels – concept, value, and practice – social cohesion is underpinned by five key elements (Jenson, 1998). These are:

- **Belonging:** shared values, collective identities, community belonging
- **Inclusion:** equal opportunities and access to labour market and other key institutions
- **Participation:** involvement and civic/political engagement
- **Recognition:** acceptance and recognition of diversity
- **Legitimacy:** legitimacy of institutions that mediate conflicts in a pluralistic society

These five elements of *belonging, inclusion, participation, recognition* and *legitimacy* form the bedrock of any society’s ability to manage its existence in peaceful and constructive ways. Take one or more of these elements away in any meaningful sense, and our ability to prevent or build resilience to violent extremism becomes more

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precarious and less viable (Grossman et al., 2016). This is so because most of the social and political grievances that lead to violent conflict around the world, past and present, originate when sense of belonging and inclusion, the ability to participate in civic or political decision-making, the ability to be recognised and accepted, or the legitimacy of our institutions becomes fragile or threatened.

Australia has long recognised the value of efforts to strengthen social cohesion as constituting an essential pillar in its approach to countering violent extremism, as well as for society more generally. Today, however, we face new risks to social cohesion that can threaten our long track record of investing in this critical element of national wellbeing and resilience to the social and political harms of radicalised violence.

Alongside a series of evolving legislative and investigative powers designed to deal with the threat and incidence of terrorism that have rolled out and strengthened successively since 2002, a number of policy and programming models have underwritten Australia's commitment to simultaneously developing non-coercive approaches to CVE that seek broad engagement between government and communities in enhancing community safety and mitigating the risks of radicalisation to violence across the ideological and political spectrum. These were developed by both Commonwealth and State Governments (Duckworth, 2015).

Previous Australian CVE policy models focusing on social cohesion include the 2006 *National Action Plan to Build on Social Cohesion, Harmony and Security*, (Commonwealth of Australia, 2007); the *2010 Counter-Terrorism White Paper* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2010), which highlighted community resilience as a key pillar of Australia's overall counter-terrorism strategy, and the 2011 establishment of a dedicated CVE Unit within the Attorney-General's Department to help build 'community cohesion and resilience to violent extremism', challenge extremist messages and develop alternative narratives to undermine terrorist social influence and propaganda (Barker, 2015).

This approach was emphasised in the National Counter Terrorism Committee (now ANZCTC) *Ten Year Anniversary Report*:

While traditional military, law enforcement and intelligence approaches to countering terrorism continue to remain paramount, addressing the long-term causes of terrorism is also vitally important. A central component of this has involved funding and coordinating countering violent extremism (CVE) projects across Australia. CVE activities aim to reduce the potential for a 'home grown' terrorist attack by strengthening Australia's resilience to radicalisation and assisting individuals to disengage from violent extremist influences and beliefs. These activities address factors that make people vulnerable to extremist influences and empower communities to intervene before a law enforcement response is needed. Activities include the rehabilitation of convicted terrorists and prisoners at risk of radicalisation, community strengthening, training and education for government officials and communities and CVE research. (NCTC, 2012)

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This development was accompanied by the *Building Community Resilience Grants Program* (2011-2014) to support a range of community sporting, religious, education, arts-based and social service organisations in delivering social cohesion-focused programming that tackled issues of social division, harmful or anti-social narratives, and mistrust between different cultural groups or between minority groups and government. *Building Community Resilience* was followed in 2014 by the *Living Safe Together* policy and resource platform, which continues to emphasise support for and the showcasing of resources, programs and information that aims to help build resilient communities based on strong and socially cohesive understanding and connectivity. Similarly, Australia's 2015 *Counter-Terrorism Strategy: Strengthening Our Resilience* (Council of Australian Governments, 2015), currently under review, identifies 'resilience and cohesion of the Australian community' as 'our best defence against violent extremism and our great asset when responding to and recovering from' terrorist attacks (COAG, 2015, p. iii).

Australian CVE policy has also long drawn a clear distinction between 'extremism' and 'violent extremism', making it clear that the Australian Government does not want to interfere with people's rights to hold various beliefs, but will intervene if those beliefs support or lead to acts of violence against individuals, communities and society at large (<https://www.livingsafetogether.gov.au/get-the-facts>). The relevance of Australia's insistence on targeting violent behaviour rather than extremist beliefs *in and of themselves* cannot be overstated in its significance for enshrining recognition and tolerance of the freedom to subscribe to different belief systems in a modern democratic, pluralist, multicultural society.

This represents a departure from the evolution of other CVE settings, for example in the France and also the United Kingdom, which, following its review of the Prevent program in 2011, explicitly turned its focus toward combatting *extremism* as a belief system, and not merely extremist ideologies that support the use of violence in its policy and practice orientation, resulting in the establishment of the Commission for Countering Extremism in 2018. While some varieties of extremist ideology can be both harmful and indeed toxic to social cohesion, the answer to mitigating these impacts does not lie in legislation (an insight reinforced by the failure of other countries to make much headway in their focus on extremist beliefs themselves) but in longer-term investment in education, community capacity-building and community resilience-enhancing initiatives.

### **Social cohesion and community resilience**

These policy features highlight the importance of the continued investment by Australia in the connection between *social cohesion* and *community resilience*.

Resilience in the context of violent extremism is focused primarily on the capacity to *resist* the appeal of violent extremism promoted by ideological, political or religious groups, as well as the capacity to *recover* from terrorist incidents that cause harm to our communities (Grossman, 2021; Ellis & Abdi, 2017). Without sufficient levels of social cohesion, community resilience is significantly weakened, because our capacity to adapt, support, learn, and develop and distribute resources to meaningfully address

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problems or challenges relating to ideologically motivated violence is reliant on the social cohesion and associated social capital that underpins such efforts. For example, in an environment of weakened social cohesion, particularly in relation to lack of trust in government institutions, we will see lower or untimely reporting to authorities by family members and friends who may have intimate knowledge of someone who is radicalising to violence, losing precious opportunities for meaningful early intervention as a result (Grossman 2015, 2018; Thomas et al. 2017, 2020).

However, the social cohesion and community resilience on which successful CVE depends has been undermined or compromised at times by ambivalent or stigmatising messaging in relation to Muslim communities and to Islam as a religion both in Australia and elsewhere (Thomas, 2012; Vermeulen, 2014; Cherney and Murphy, 2017; Tahiri and Grossman, 2013). In fact, some critics have argued that any efforts to link social cohesion to countering violent extremism undermine social cohesion policies by creating distrust toward social cohesion initiatives as merely a Trojan horse approach to surveilling and securitising minority groups under cover of a community harmony and wellbeing agenda. These remain current issues in the contemporary landscape of efforts to prevent and counter violent extremism, and renewed attention must be given to showing that Australian policy and programs are, in practice as well as in name, 'agnostic' in relation both to the ideological spectrum of threats and to the critically important role of *all* communities in contributing toward efforts to limit the appeal and take-up of socially divisive hateful and violent extremist narratives.

**Further steps and a new approach**

In addition to the comment on the 2015 Strategy set out above under ToR 3 (b), we suggest the following.

The Commonwealth needs to develop a preferred approach for dealing with these issues. One of the key things all governments working in this area need to realize is that *HOW* they do this work is just as important as *WHICH* initiatives they undertake. These are complex issues which require a high degree of collaboration and trust between governments and communities; between different communities; and between individuals and civil society.

These issues cannot be solved by one age group, sector, community, institution or organisation by itself. One key is equipping young people so they can successfully engaging with the many challenges we collectively face. This may mean reaching beyond established community leadership and existing programs.

Governments should engage with a broad range of stakeholders to identify common interests and benefits that may be achieved by working together. This would help in securing broad ownership of strategies and goals and in bringing about a long-term commitment to being part of the solution.

Previous Commonwealth initiatives have failed when they have been seen as government *telling* communities what to do (and even what to say) rather than genuinely consulting what communities can contribute. Also, the Commonwealth Government has often wanted its initiatives separate from State or local government or even NGO

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ones. Experience has shown that when governments appear to promote their initiatives through media releases rather than quietly working with communities, the initiatives are generally doomed.

The Commonwealth needs to work in a sustained and respectful way in real partnership with other governments, NGOs, research organisations, and communities to achieve the following:

1. increasing our understanding of the factors that either strengthen or undermine social cohesion and community resilience;
2. encouraging a socially cohesive Australia underpinned by social justice and equity in which all its people have a sense of belonging, acceptance and worth, and have equal opportunity to participate meaningfully in all aspects of society;
3. welcoming communities, particularly young people, having the agency needed to address social, economic, and cultural issues that may lead to individual or community isolation, anti-social behaviour, including violence, and to develop the community resilience that helps in preventing violent extremism;
4. supporting inter-community and inter-cultural interaction and understanding, built on the recognition that shared values and the foundations of common humanity transcend cultural and religious difference.

We now know that there are certain core principles about how this work should be done, as described below.

**Innovation and co-creation**

Initiatives should be co-created with a broad range of stakeholders. These should be based on existing community strengths and reflect the local context. This includes working face-to-face and online across many sectors such as education, employment, the arts, sports, and local government sectors. This involves more than just community consultation. Under the traditional model, professionals plan and deliver a service often consulting communities in planning and design. The more co-operative approach uses other methods such as co-creation, co-design and co-production in which user and professional knowledge is combined to design and deliver services. (Boyle and Harris, 2009; Burkett, 2012)

There needs to a greater risk appetite and willingness to experiment with new and innovative ideas, recognising that many of them may fail. A tolerance for a degree of failure is essential. Being overly risk averse would, paradoxically, substantially increase the risk of missing important opportunities and solving key problems. This collaborative approach is increasingly being used around the world to tackle social issues where the solutions are unclear, experimentation is supported, and where no single entity has the authority or resources to design and implement new initiatives.

**Based on the best evidence**

Governments need to commission and source research and evaluations and, importantly, to recognise the knowledge that comes from community insights. They need to identify promising and best practices. There need to be opportunities for regular

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reflection and learning to take account of, adapt to and respond to the insights from new evidence and changing global and local circumstances.

**Sustainable long-term initiatives**

This is about long-term change. Governments often want to see “results” within a short timeframe or budget cycle.

We need to think about this in the same way as we approach public health issues or reducing the road toll. The behavioural changes arising from these have taken decades, and governments of all types have been willing to take the time and sustain the effort to achieve long-term results that have longitudinal impact and outcomes. Sustainability needs to be considered from the outset given the long-term nature of social change.

**3 (f) The role of social media, encrypted communications platforms and the dark web in allowing extremists to communicate and organise.**

**Social media can both unite and divide communities**

While the current Covid-19 pandemic has deepened grievances and existential threats in an increasingly atomised, housebound, online, existence, the internet has never been more critical to the operation and resilience of societies globally. Social media platforms can both reinforce connections that may support resilience, and also lead to extended time spent in closed groups, where there may be limited exposure to different perspectives and information sets. The algorithms that govern online platforms moreover provide users with content that is a reflection on their preferences and can lead people to encounter more of what they know, and less of what is unfamiliar to them (Bartlett, 2018; Gillespie, 2019).

These environments entrap people, helping spread disinformation and gravitation towards extreme ideas, with social media algorithms recommending content by likeminded people and groups. Social media may contribute to a conducive environment for recruitment into extremist organisations by being instrumental in the circulation of fake news, creating disinformation bubbles that may reinforce the dynamics of polarisation (RAN, 2017).

Therefore, social networking sites offer both opportunities for pro-social resilience and encourage exclusivist views to the detriment of democracy and social cohesion (Grossman et al. 2016). Anti-social forms of resilience have been the subject of considerable sociological research (Aly et al., 2016; Cottee, 2011, Nilsson, 2015, Joose et al., 2015, Klausen, 2015, Qureshi, 2015, Ranstorp, 2010, Thomas, 2012) as efforts to counter or prevent radicalisation to violent extremism, for example, have proliferated. More recently, a number of studies in projects such as the European Union's Horizon 2020 BRaVE project have begun to address the intersectional motivations driving contemporary violent extremist behaviour in a context of polarisation (McNeil-Willson et al., 2019) in order to build resilience to such violence. These studies make clear the need to devote more substantial attention to channels of communication that support pro-social resilience, and how they might operate both on and offline.

**The role of social media in the promotion, recruitment and proliferation of terrorism**

Social media has demonstrated in the modern era that it is highly capable of proliferating the spread of terrorist social influence and the enablement of violent action. Where organisations once relied on networks of recruiters and recruitment magnets (fixed physical radicalisation locations such as mosques or book shops), they now look towards social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and a range of encrypted channels and platforms to further their causes. Terrorist organisations are using social media for recruitment, training and communicating with an increasingly global range of followers, supporters and donors (Hossain, 2018).

Given the accessibility and reach of the internet, social media platforms can be used

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by terrorist groups to provide advice, training manuals and videos, and instructions for attacks from the other side of the world.

Individuals may be approached online by recruiters or find platforms where likeminded individuals frequent. Recruiters, in the same way that was traditionally done before the internet, instruct the individuals to pledge allegiance, train the recruits and maintain contact themselves or assign handlers to continue the radicalisation process.

The threat of right-wing terrorism has only increased during COVID-19 through the increasing influence of social media and other online platforms. The Christchurch massacre by right-wing extremist Brenton Tarrant highlighted how right-wing extremists can use platforms such as Facebook and YouTube to stream their atrocities live. Tarrant additionally posted a manifesto to the platform 8chan prior to the attack, sparking debate and renewed calls for better regulation and focus on the need for better engagement and communication between social media companies and security services to prevent similar attacks.

Various right-wing extremist organisations and movements, including neo-Nazis and conspiracy theorists, make intensified use of digital environments to fuel curiosity about, interest in and exposure to radical ideology. Social media such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram serve as 'low-risk' entry platforms for right-wing extremism in comparison to platforms such as 4chan, 8chan/Kun, Gab, Reddit and others, which can be seen as higher risk channels in moving along the supply-chain of toxic extremist exposure and immersion. Movement from low-risk to high-risk platforms exposes individuals to smaller communities with less access to different opinions, thus creating confirmation bias (Waldek et al., 2020).

### **Data**

Between September and December 2014 there were thought to be between 46,000 and 70,000 Twitter accounts being actively used by Islamic State supporters, each with an average of 1000 followers (Berger and Morgan, 2015). Account suspensions by Twitter were successful in reducing the spread of information from these accounts. however, not successful in preventing new ones from emerging (Hossain, 2018).

The Taliban's Twitter account amassed over 7000 followers before being suspended, tweeting hourly. Somali terrorist group Al-Shabab also had a Twitter account with tens of thousands of followers which tweeted frequently. Boko Haram took to YouTube to claim a series of bombings in 2011, defending their ideology and warning security forces of their presence (BBC, 2012).

These early trends have only strengthened further. Macquarie University and Victoria University conducted an analysis of six social media platforms from August to November 2019 that included Twitter (37,422 tweets from 3,321 users), Gab (1,357,391 toots from 23,836 accounts), information from 30 right-wing Facebook pages, Reddit, 4chan and 8chan message boards. Results found acceptability of increased right-wing values and opinions, creating a looming threat to Australia's political norms (Waldek et al., 2020).



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An analysis of historic data also demonstrates that Australians have been well-represented in communities associated with right wing terrorism. An analysis of the Iron March forums, which was taken offline in 2017 and was crucial to the growth of groups like Atomwaffen, found that Australians were the fourth most represented community on the forum after American, British, and Canadian users. However, when the proportion of Iron March users was compared to the overall volume of internet users in these countries, Australians were proportionally the most strongly represented community on the platform, with one Iron March user per 262,500 internet users for Australia in comparison to one user per 455,520 internet users in the United States (ISD, 2020c).

### **What responsibilities do tech companies have?**

Due to increased surveillance of social media platforms by intelligence agencies and law enforcement, accounts are frequently changed, making the task of locating the individuals responsible and monitoring or removing the information extremely challenging for social media companies and security agencies alike.

Despite these challenges, there are practical measures that can be taken by social media companies to reduce the spread and proliferation of terrorism through social media. **Disruption** continues to be extremely important and involves timely removal of content, breaking the flow in the spread of data by groups and taking down multiple linked accounts.

There is an additional prevalence of encryption websites, chatrooms, groups and forums being used by terrorists to communicate securely with their followers. Social media companies are being asked by governments and security services for more transparency and **access to encryption** services to curb the issue. Torok (2017) recommended security agencies and government work with social media companies to build an understanding of **key words** used in recruitment for terrorism.

**Counter-narratives, particularly in the form of alternative narratives**, can play a key role in the digital fight against terrorism where tech companies and security agencies are able to support efforts to deconstruct radical ideologies, expose flaws in their reasoning and highlight the serious consequences of joining terrorist causes. Counter- and alternative narratives can help in the prevention of recruitment. Done in combination with disruption methods, counter- and alternative narratives can provide a means to intervene with vulnerable individuals who might be susceptible to radical ideologies online.

### **Policy recommendations**

The Commonwealth Government established an Australian Taskforce to Combat Terrorist and Extreme Violent material Online in the wake of the Christchurch terror attacks in March 2019. We support each of the Commonwealth's recommendations to tackle terrorist and extreme violent material online through prevention; detection and removal; transparency; deterrence, and capacity building (Prime Minister of Australia Media Release, 30 June 2019). These recommendations include the commitment of major social media companies to:

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- Work proactively to prevent terrorist and extreme violent material from being disseminated on social media platforms;
- Identify, fast-track and report to government on appropriate checks for live streaming to reduce the risk of users spreading terrorist and violent extremist content;
- Implement more effective and user-friendly reporting mechanisms for the flagging of live-stream terrorist and extreme violent content;
- Strengthen account management practices to deal effectively with those who exploit social media platforms for the dissemination of terrorist and extreme violent content, and
- Create, building on work by the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT), an online toolbox for smaller online services to access support to successfully prevent, detect and respond to the spread of violent terrorist and extremist information.

Allied to these measures should be increased investment in digital and information literacy education and resources for all Australians, beyond the investment currently made for school-age students. Such investment is critical because, however successful we are in limiting access to terrorist and violent extremist material, no such system of proscription and take-downs will ever be foolproof and such material will continue to circulate, even if more limited in degree and reach. Building the capacity of all Australians, including older and culturally and linguistically diverse Australians, to critically evaluate and build lasting resilience to such content through strategies such as “attitudinal inoculation” (Braddock, 2019) remains an urgent priority.

## **CRIS Submission: Concluding remarks**

This Inquiry provides Australia with a welcome opportunity to reset its approach to preventing and countering violent extremism. Greater attention needs to be given to the whole of society factors that lead to extremism.

The globalised world of which Australia is part means that events, conspiracy theories, extremist ideologies and the iconography of hate originating in other parts of the world can have a direct effect on the take-up of hateful and violent extremism in Australia. Specifically, the body of collective knowledge we have outlined elements of here emphasises several core approaches that are necessary for effective work in preventing or countering violent extremism:

1. Focussing on this as a security issue alone can be misleading and counterproductive. It requires multi-disciplinary and multi-institutional involvement. A whole of community approach is vital, as are genuine and sustainable partnerships between government and community organisations and groups.
2. Dealing with the broader issues of social, economic political marginalisation is important to address grievances and make people feel that they have stake in their societies. This can make people less vulnerable to recruitment into extremist violence. However, securitising social programs is counterproductive.
3. Effectively preventing the spread of violent extremism in different communities needs a localised and tailored approach that is sensitive to local cultures and religious beliefs;
4. Local communities, young people, families, and community and faith leaders need to be empowered to design and pilot community-led programs, and not merely implement 'top-down' government-designed initiatives.
5. Understanding that hate speech normalises extremism and that challenging extremist narratives and views requires credible and authentic voices and needs to be part of a broader, sophisticated communications strategy that understands hate speech as part of the continuum of social harms that violent extremist ideologies seek to promote.

The time is ripe for Australia to refocus its approach once again beyond intelligence, law enforcement and legislative responses. There needs to be a clearer understanding of the power of emotion and rhetoric in violent extremist appeals, recruitment and influence, and of the profound social, cultural, economic and political transformations wrought by the global technological transition into an advanced digital age, which present new challenges but also new opportunities.

Australia remains much more cohesive and trusting society than many others in the world. However, we know that we are not immune from the forces that have directly influenced what has happened in other countries, and this requires both increasing vigilance and also increasing creativity and common purpose in how we address these trends. In so doing, we need to work consistently with our diverse communities for solutions alongside those developed by government. It is also an opportunity for members of this Parliamentary Joint Committee, as eminent leaders in Australia, to

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reflect on their own responsibilities, and the responsibilities of their fellow political representatives, to work in true bipartisan fashion to keep these forces from gaining a greater foothold in our nation.

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**CRIS**  
Centre for Resilient  
and Inclusive Societies

**Submission by the Centre for Resilient and Inclusive  
Societies (CRIS)  
to the Victorian Parliament Legal and Social Issues  
Committee  
Inquiry into Extremism in Victoria  
May 2022**

This Submission has been prepared by members of the Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies (CRIS). CRIS is a research and program-based think tank consortium of eight Australian and international academic, community and industry partners – Deakin University, Western Sydney University, Victoria University, the Resilience Research Centre-Dalhousie University (Canada), the Australian Multicultural Foundation (AMF), the Centre for Multicultural Youth (CMY), RAND Australia, and the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) (UK). CRIS was established in October 2018 through a program grant from the State Government of Victoria to deliver research, programs and inform policies that advance and enrich our local, national, and international community cohesion and resilience.

CRIS works on a range of related issues including:

- Social polarisation and disengagement from the public sphere.
- The rise of social exclusivist identities based on ethnicity, religion, or culture.
- The influence of global conflicts and tensions on local environments and actors.
- The social harms created when grievances and alienation translate into violent action against specific groups or society at large.

For more information about CRIS and its activities, please see:  
<https://www.crisconsortium.org/>

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### General introductory remarks

On behalf of the Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies (CRIS), we thank the Victorian Parliament for the opportunity to make a submission to the Legal and Social Issues Committee's inquiry into far-right extremism in Victoria. With this inquiry, the Parliament demonstrates its acknowledgment that far-right extremism is a complex, multifaceted socio-political issue that affects many Victorians and needs to be addressed with a high level of urgency.

In January 2019, an article in *The Age* (Colangelo, 2019) argued that 'Victoria has become the noisiest, most active battleground for far right-wing groups in Australia'. The article was published the day after a large far-right rally in St Kilda – which turned out to be the last significant public protest organised by the far-right in Victoria as of May 2022. While Victoria may have seen a particularly high level of far-right rallies between 2015 and 2019, that does not necessarily mean far-right ideologies are more widespread in Victoria. To the contrary, there is evidence that many Victorians are particularly supportive of multiculturalism and progressive policies (e.g. same sex marriage).

The rise of the far-right extremism is a national – even a global – problem, but there are also significant differences between how far-right networks and individual operate in different parts of the country, which makes this Victorian-specific inquiry so important. And the inquiry is also very timely: More than two years after the COVID-19 pandemic arrived in Victoria, the far-right landscape has become more complex than ever, not least due to the increasing influence of misinformation, conspiratorial agendas and growing anti-government sentiments and mistrust.

Noting that far-right extremist movements, like other extremist movements with different ideological coordinates, have never been static, this is a crucial time to seek to better understand new and old complexities of far-right extremism, how they manifest in Victoria, and how we can best respond to these challenges. An evidence-based understanding is the foundation for the development and implementation of effective prevention and intervention measures, involving a range of stakeholders from government and law enforcement to community organisations, groups and individuals.

This submission focuses on the following Terms of Reference (TORs):

- a) The rise of the far-right extremist movements in Victoria in the context of
  - ii) racist scapegoating and
  - iv) the distrust of governments and politicians
- b) Methods of recruitment and communication
- d) Risks that far-right extremist actions pose to Victoria and especially to Victoria's multicultural communities

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- f) Links between far-right extremist groups, other forms of extremism, and populist radical right and anti-vaccine misinformation groups
- g) Steps to be taken in Victoria to counter these far-right extremist groups and their influence, including:
  - i) the role of early intervention measures to diminish the recruitment and mobilisation prospects of far-right extremist groups, and
  - ii) the role of social cohesion, greater civil engagement and empowerment, and community building programs

We would like to draw the Inquiry's attention to the fact that in this submission we refrain from naming far-right extreme groups or individuals in Victoria to avoid contributing inadvertently to promoting them or broadening their exposure. The authors of this submission can provide names and further details upon request from the Committee.

**a) The rise of the far-right extremist movements in Victoria**

Far-right extremism can be understood as 'a loose movement, characterized by a racially, ethnically and sexually defined nationalism. This nationalism is often framed in terms of white power and is grounded in xenophobic and exclusionary understandings of the perceived threats posed by such groups as people of colour, Jews, immigrants, the LGBTQ community and feminists' (Perry and Scrivens, 2015, 5). Australian and Victorian specific research on far-right extremism has applied a similar conceptual framework (Simmons et al., [2021](#); Guerin et al., [2021](#); Guerin et al., [2020](#); Peucker et al., 2018, Peucker et al., 2020).

While far-right extremist movements, in Victoria and more generally, are highly heterogenous and fragmented, there are several core ideological markers that have been used in academia to define far-right extremism. According to a recent analysis, Carter (2018: 168) identified six key attributes: 'strong state or authoritarianism, nationalism, racism, xenophobia, anti-democracy, and populism or anti-establishment rhetoric.' She further differentiates between defining and accompanying attributes, arguing that 'authoritarianism, anti-democracy, and an exclusionary and/or a holistic kind of nationalism are defining properties of right-wing extremism/radicalism, [while] xenophobia, racism, and populism are accompanying characteristics of the concept' (Carter, 2018: 174). Anti-establishment and anti-democracy ideologies often manifest in high level of distrust toward political institutions (Bartlett et al., 2011) and cumulate in assertions of illegitimacy of established governments or regimes of power (Lauder, 2002).

If we seek to understand the **rise of far-right extremist movements in Victoria**, it is



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important to acknowledge that none of these ideological attributes – from racism to anti-democratic sentiments – necessarily determines whether or not someone is a far-right extremist. Far-right extremist movements create, and operate within, parallel ideologically shaped communities in radical and antagonistic opposition to the political mainstream. These communities generally reject basic principles of political deliberation. Yet those who identify with these far-right networks create alternative communities that promote a sense of belonging and connectedness with likeminded others, forming sustained in-group identities and bonds and enacting their ideological sentiments through verbal, physical, online and offline exchanges and activities.

The prevalence of certain ideological views or attitudes such as racism, homo/transphobia or authoritarianism and anti-government sentiments increases someone's vulnerability to far-right radicalisation (Goodwin et al., [2016](#)) but they are not in themselves evidence for the rise of far-right extremism. Similarly, social isolation and possibly growing economic insecurities may, under certain conditions, increase one's susceptibility to far-right narratives, but these are complex processes that interplay with, among many other factors, individuals' sense of marginalization, perceived lack of control, and desire for recognition, status and social connectedness. In considering the rise of far-right extremism, therefore, we do not refer primarily to the potential increase in the prevalence of certain ideologies or socioeconomic circumstances (although these factors may contribute to increased vulnerability), but rather examine factors that can indicate the growth of online and offline far-right communities and networks.

CRIS research focusing in particular on the situation in Victoria (Simmons et al., [2021](#); Guerin et al., [2021](#); Guerin et al., [2020](#)), for example, found an exponential **increase in the popularity of far-right online spaces**. This indicates that the far-right is not only becoming more radicalized, as research had previously noted (Peucker et al., 2018), and bolder in their public display of their exclusivist agendas - far-right movements also appear to be quantitatively expanding.

One example is the far-right alt-tech social media platform Gab, where the 'subgroup "Australia" saw a drastic increase in new members after Christchurch, from around 4,500 in mid-March 2019 to over 11,000 in June 2019, and has since continuously grown to over 45,000 members as of March 2021' (Guerin et al., 2021: 7). Mainly fueled by anti-lockdown and anti-vax narratives, this number has since increased to close to 74,000 as of May 2022. Certainly not all of these 74,000 individuals are Australian citizens, given the international nature of these online spaces, but several factors suggest that many of them are located in Australia.

There has also been a large increase in followers of prominent Victorian far-right actors on Telegram, reaching over 15,000, over the past few years, especially during the heights of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many contextual factors may have contributed to this increase, but what seems to have played an important role are certain

ideological (e.g. anti-government views) and personal overlaps between anti-lockdown and antivax movements and far-right milieux.

There is also evidence that far-right actors have deliberately and strategically tried to recruit members by co-opting the anti-lockdown/anti-vax movements. Australian white nationalist groups on Telegram, for example, refer to anti-lockdown Telegram groups as 'normie channels' that can be used to for recruitment purposes ('good to reach other Aussies'). A number of Victorian-based white supremacy figureheads have sought to fuel grievances and anti-government sentiments within the anti-lockdown/anti-vax groups and attempted to co-opt them for their own ideological propaganda and recruitment. The leader of a white nationalist group in Victoria, for example, expressed his support and praise for anti-vax protesters but encouraged them to engage with his ideological proposition regarding white nationalism to achieve 'long term success' that moved beyond the immediate focus of anti-vax dissent.

## ii. Racism and far-right extremism

Manifestations of racism are not limited to the fringes of society. Islamophobia as a form of anti-Muslim racism, sometimes referred to as cultural racism or what Barker (1981) once called 'new racism', for example, continues to be widespread (albeit declining to some extent) in Australia (Markus, [2021](#)) and discrimination against First Nations people and migrant/ethno-religious communities has been high. Not everyone who harbors racist/racially exclusivist views (or even acts in a racist way), is a far-right extremist, but most far-right extremists hold ethno-nationalist attitudes that are rooted in racism and a racially or culturally based form of white superiority/supremacy. Racist scapegoating is common within far-right spaces. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, CRIS research found that Australian far-right online spaces (both mainstream social media such as Facebook and Twitter and alt-tech predominantly far-right platforms such as Gab) were commonly used to blame Muslims for the spread of the virus, spread anti-Chinese hatred and antisemitic conspiracy narratives (Simmons et al., [2021](#); Guerin et al., [2021](#); Guerin et al., [2020](#)).

While racism may not be a reliable indicator for far-right extremism, it is both a central part of far-right messaging and their bifurcated in/outgroup messaging and also a risk factor that can **increase a person's susceptibility to far-right mobilisation** and recruitment, as previous research has demonstrated (Goodwin et al., [2016](#)). For example, Islamophobic attitudes have played a key role in drawing individuals into far-right spaces and conspiracy-based communities, as a recent Victorian research study illustrated: A group of Victorian far-right activists interviewed for this study stated: 'When we first came together it was just about Islam, but it is about so much more now' (Peucker, [2021a](#)).

Where and how does the articulation of racism pinpoint far-right extremist ideologies? Recent Victorian-based research identified three factors (Peucker et al., 2020):

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1. *Racism as part of a larger meta-narrative*: Within far-right extremist ideologies and community spaces racism is not ‘only’ a personal attitude but it is often functionally embedded in a larger ideological meta-narrative, built on conspiratorial thinking about a secretive global plot aimed at destroying Australian society and culture. Agitating against ethnic or religious minorities is commonplace, but this is often linked to a bigger fight against an alleged enemy such as the government and its institution or the UN who are accused of using immigration and multiculturalism as a weapon against ‘white people’ or to undermine Western civilization.
2. *Racism as part of far-right political action*: Far-right extremists are usually keen to become active in pursuit of their political-ideological agenda. They usually don’t shy away from acting upon their racist attitudes in one way or another and see themselves as being on a political mission. Jamin (2013: 46) referred to this behavioural dimension as ‘a “total” way of acting to give shape to the nationalist project in support of the acknowledgement of inequality.’
3. *Language and ‘collective identity’*: Expressions of racism as a central non-negotiable aspect of a collective mindset within a certain community, online or offline, can be an indicator of far-right extremism. Within such fringe communities, people tend to use specific language, expressions and symbols to demonstrate their insider status and group belonging and articulate their racist and otherwise exclusivist ideological mindsets. Simi and Windisch (2020: 4) refer to this as ‘identity talk’: ‘a discursive practice to demonstrate that an individual’s identity is consistent with the perceived collective identity of the movement.’

**iv. Decline of trust and rise of extremism**

The decline of trust and increase in trust inequality is directly linked to radicalisation and extremism trends identified by ASIO. The Australian Director-General of Security’s 2021 Annual Threat Assessment stated:

It’s fair to say that threats to our safety and security didn’t go away with the onset of COVID. In many areas, they evolved; in some they intensified.... For those intent on violence, more time at home online meant more time in the echo chamber of the internet on the pathway to radicalisation. They were able to access hate-filled manifestos and attack instructions, without some of the usual circuit breakers that contact with community provides.<sup>129</sup>

It is clear that when people do not trust the information from government or the evidence of experts, they will turn to other sources. This includes extremist messaging. It is not the case that, for instance, all anti-vaxxers are right wing

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<sup>129</sup> <https://www.asio.gov.au/publications/speeches-and-statements/director-generals-annual-threat-assessment-2021.html>

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extremists. However, it is true that those recruiting for religious and racial exclusivist causes are seeking to exploit this decline of trust and have found some willing to listen to their version of reality.

Far-right extremism has thus grown in part because of a void left by the decline of trust in the institutions that form civil society and in the broad economic and policy settings that have been in place in Australia since the 1980s.

This is not unique to Australia. The OECD found that in 2019 only 45% of citizens trusted their government. It stated that ‘trust in government is deteriorating in many OECD countries. Lack of trust compromises the willingness of citizens and business to respond to public policies and contribute to a sustainable economic recovery.’ The OECD also noted that the ‘breadth and depth of the COVID-19 crisis make it incumbent on the public sector to challenge existing models for measuring trust.’<sup>130</sup>

The dynamics of eroding trust during the early part of the pandemic illustrates how strongly connected it is to the good working of society. Initially, as the strains of ‘we are all in this together’ echoed around the world, trust in government soared. This was particularly the case in Australia, where the Edelman Trust Barometer in 2020 measured all-time highs for trust in institutions. This proved, however, to be a ‘false dawn’ and across the world the decline of trust in governments continued its previous downward path.<sup>131</sup>

Linked to this social phenomenon is a decline of trust in public information – the infodemic – that has been particularly amplified by the pandemic. The Edelman Trust Barometer (2022) concluded that ‘we find a world ensnared in a vicious cycle of distrust, fueled by a growing lack of faith in media and government. Through disinformation and division, these two institutions are feeding the cycle and exploiting it for commercial and political gain.’

Trust is distributed across different communities in different ways. The Edelman Trust Barometer differentiates between ‘two different trust realities’ – high for the well-off and the more highly educated, and low for the economically and educationally disadvantaged. Trust inequality in Australia is among the worst in the world. This has brought, according to the Edelman Trust Barometer analysis, ‘an additional layer of complexity as [institutions] try to share information and communicate effectively with two distinct audiences: one that trusts, and one that doesn’t.’<sup>132</sup>

In Australia this has meant that ‘distrust’ is now often the default. A key finding of the

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<sup>130</sup> <https://www.oecd.org/gov/trust-in-government.htm>

<sup>131</sup> <https://www.edelman.com.au/australias-false-dawn>

<sup>132</sup> [https://www.edelman.com.au/australias-false-dawn#:~:text=Edelman's%20most%20recent%20Australian%20survey,and%20business%20\(%2D4%20points\).](https://www.edelman.com.au/australias-false-dawn#:~:text=Edelman's%20most%20recent%20Australian%20survey,and%20business%20(%2D4%20points).)

2022 Edelman Trust Barometer in Australia is that ‘a majority of Australians (55%) say their default tendency is to distrust something until they see evidence it is trustworthy. Another 61% say it has gotten to a point where Australians are incapable of having constructive and civil debates about issues they disagree on – a foundational trait of a functioning and productive society, especially in democratic nations’.<sup>133</sup>

This decline is also linked to the move to a ‘risk society’ which has resulted in the experience of risk being individualised, rather than acknowledging the structural features and dynamics of how risk is experienced and navigated. These changes in societal structure ‘have dissolved the bonds of collective experience, leading to atomised forms of existence’ (Mythen, 2004: 28).

The economic and policy settings around globalisation and economic efficiency in particular are seen as having led to a decline in the availability of secure employment, further eroding trust in public institutions and government bodies responsible for social and economic wellbeing. These trends have been exploited by extreme actors who have sought to demonise foreigners and immigrants as part of the problem, as exemplified by, amongst other international trends, the vote for ‘Brexit’ in the UK, the ‘MAGA’ rhetoric in the USA and the rise of populism in countries including Hungary and Brazil.

In Victoria, we have seen similar amplification of populist sentiment by segments of political, media and social influencers, which have further legitimised and normalised a public discourse environment in which such ‘post-truth’ claims are increasingly difficult to challenge and refute. This post-truth uncertainty in turn fuels the ways in which misinformation and mistrust have been leveraged by far-right extremists to sow doubt and discord in relation to Victorian, and Australian, community cohesion.

## **(b) Methods of recruitment and communication**

As a current study now being undertaken by CRIS has shown,<sup>134</sup> the research literature on extremist and terrorist recruitment indicates that recruitment to right-wing extremism, as for other forms of extremist recruitment, can manifest simultaneously as a ‘top-down’, ‘bottom-up’ and ‘horizontal’ process (Grossman et al., 2021). This means extremist recruitment is sometimes driven by organisational needs and objectives (top down), sometimes by the needs and desires of those who wish to join a movement (bottom up), and sometimes through ‘horizontal’ networks of friends, peers and kin. In all these scenarios, however, those who are recruited are not simply passive ‘victims’ without agency, but active participants in recruitment processes and dynamics. Similarly, those who recruit should not be regarded as powerful agents able to unproblematically manipulate those they target. Instead, recruitment to right-wing

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<sup>133</sup> <https://www.edelman.com.au/trust-barometer-2022-australia>

<sup>134</sup> ‘Contact Zones: Understanding Recruitment Processes to Violent Extremism in Comparative Domains’, <https://www.crisconsortium.org/building-resilience-social-harms/contact-zones>

extremism constitutes a complex process of 'co-production' that meets the psychosocial, political and sometimes economic needs of both recruiter and recruited.

As Simi et al. (2016) found in the US context, recruitment is a 'gradual and dynamic process where some individuals are formally marketed to and recruited, others are self-starters who then allow themselves to be 'enlisted' and 'recruitment occurs in a variety of social spaces such as music shows, schools, house parties, neighbourhoods, and online (Simi et al., 2016). Similarly, in the Australian and more specifically the Victorian context, evidence indicates that far-right recruitment activities 'sit along a continuum that range from active and deliberate top-down strategies to attract and incorporate new members by a radical-right group, on the one hand, to passive forms of recruitment that rely much more on self-recruitment' (Peucker, 2021b).

This more nuanced understanding acknowledges the complexity of recruitment processes has implications for the way in which prevention and interventions measures are developed and implemented, taking into account different recruitment pathways and the agency of all actors.

In the following, we explore three dimensions of far-right recruitment in more detail: (1) targeted recruitment, (2) Recruitment through social networks and social influence, and (3) online recruitment.

### **1. Targeted recruitment**

Recruitment to far-right extremism can be centrally conceived and organisationally driven from the top down. For example, the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) (2020) has documented how the neo-Nazi organisation 'The Base' organisationally manages recruitment through an active and deliberate process of using both offline and online methodologies to attract new members with a specific profile or skill set, followed by an internal application process. A BBC investigation (De Simone and Winston, 2020) into the 'The Base' found senior members undertaking online interviewing (via conference call on an encrypted App) of prospective 'young applicants' who divulged that they had been radicalised by 'online videos and propaganda'. The article details how interviewers asked about applicants' personal history, their 'radicalisation journey' (including what books they had read whilst also being encouraged to familiarise themselves with the groups white supremacist ideology) their experience with weapons, and their ethnicity. Interviews were conducted by the group leader as well as a panel of senior Base members. After applicants left the call, senior members discussed their potential for membership prior to arranging to vet them in person at a later date.

A number of Victorian far-right groups, include white nationalist networks, use a similar targeted top-down approach to recruit new members, including specific vetting procedures (e.g. a dedicated vetting channel on Telegram, followed by a personal conversation/interview either online or offline with the potential recruitee). In some

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instances, such vetting processes seem to be seen as redundant as the ideological commitment of the person to a white nationalist agenda has been demonstrated otherwise. A Victorian-based extreme far-right group, for example, reached out to Brenton Tarrant (who would later commit terrorist attacks killing 51 Muslims in Christchurch) and invited him to join their group – an invitation Tarrant declined (Peucker, 2021b).

These groups frequently call on individuals to reach out to them and/or engage with their online content but also to join their network as a new member. Online and offline recruiting strategies can also intersect through mechanisms such as public flyer drops, graffiti and stickering/postering blitzes, a common tactic of Victorian far-right groups to attract attention among potential recruits. As Berger et al. (2020: 123) have noted,

There is no clear line of demarcation between online extremism and the current generation of flyer drops and ephemeral propaganda. Extremist flyers point readers to online destinations, but they also emanate from online destinations, and after they have been deployed, they are amplified again online.

International research from Germany and the USA has found that some far-right extremist groups target young people through recruitment within educational institutions and/or members of law enforcement agencies and armed forces (Braunthal, 2010; Counter Extremism Project, 2020; Flade, 2021; Simi et al., 2016; ADL, 2020; McGowan, 2014). A particularly common operational recruitment tactic is through leafletting and postering in schools, music concerts and other public areas (Berger et al., 2020; Simi et al., 2016). This has also been common in the Victorian context, where numerous public sites, including universities, have been targeted by white nationalist groups' stickering or postering blitzes. The public stunts are then often filmed or photographed and uploaded on their online social media sites.

Various types of subcultural contexts such as music venues/concerts and private house parties have also been found to be important environments in which right-wing movement ideologies may be introduced and social bonds facilitated in order to recruit sympathisers (especially among younger people) towards more substantial involvement (Kruglanski, et al., 2020; Scrivens and Perry, 2017). Exposure to far-right propaganda in youth clubs, soccer teams, or even simply through casual encounters with vocal neo-Nazis is also prevalent. Other radicalising spaces such as larger scale public rallies and protest events are used to provide an entry point for new recruits.

Some far-right groups also target *individuals* with particular vulnerabilities (Brown, R. A. et al., 2021: 86). There are different ways in which far-right groups seek to identify or determine vulnerabilities and, accordingly, adjust their recruitment strategies. Some specifically target alienated, disenchanting young people who are seen as having psychological and social grievances, while a study on recruitment to far-right extremism in the US identifies three groups of individuals who are targeted: '(1)

frustrated and angry youth looking for solutions to their problems; (2) individuals looking for intimate relationships outside of their families and (3) younger adolescents who typically lacked maturity and may have been unable to fully comprehend the ramifications of a group's radical ideology' (Simi et al., 2016: 60).

Other studies argue that recruitment also takes into account individuals' socioeconomic grievances and hardship; this is reflected in how some groups use spatially based tactics to explicitly target certain geographical areas where such grievances are expected to be more prevalent (Blazak, 2001). Kimmel and Ferber's (2000) analysis of US militia movements, for example, found that some groups focused on rural areas where they saw an 'opportunity to increase their political base by recruiting economically troubled farmers into their ranks.' The increased resonance of far-right ideologies in economically struggling areas is confirmed by Youngblood's (2020: 1) contagion-based analysis of the spread of far-right ideologies in the US, which confirms that 'endemic factors, such as poverty, that increase the probability of radicalization in particular regions.' Similarly, Simi et al. (2016: 50) found that many of those who have joined far-right group had grown up in 'tough neighbourhoods' with high levels of street gang violence and bullying – and the far-right groups offered protection against these threats.

Grievances are not the only vulnerability factor. Some research indicates that pre-existing ideological mindsets play a role in the decision of far-right groups to target certain individuals. A study on recruitment to right-wing organisations in Germany study, for example, found that right-wing groups have sought to recruit new members through conservative right-wing student fraternities or, in high school, by targeting fellow students who already hold racist or antisemitic views and 'who find little support in the school and at home' (Braunthal, 2010); similarly, 'The Base' has deliberately tried to attract new members that already had right-wing ideological beliefs or specific skill sets (ADL, 2020).

Some extreme far-right (white nationalist) groups in Australia, and in particular in Victoria, pursue an ideologically unambiguous agenda, making no secret of their ideological worldviews and targeting in particular people who are ideologically predisposed or at least open to their white supremacist worldviews. A prominent far-right leader in Victoria 'used his Telegram channel call on "White men with Blood and Honour" in Australia, committed to the "racial struggle" for the survival of the "our race", to send an email to his organisation' (Peucker, 2021b).

## **2. Recruitment through social networks and social influence**

Recruitment does not only unfold in a 'top-down' fashion between individuals who are unknown to each other; it also occurs within existing social networks where individuals trust each other and share similar experiences and connections.

International research has found evidence that friends, peer groups (e.g. at schools),



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and sometimes families often play a central role in individuals' pathways into far-right extremism (Kruglanski et al., 2020; Blazak, 2001). A study on the Italian far-right group CasaPound (Parker and Veugelers, 2021: 3) found that some activists had become involved through their politicisation in social networks that created a new social 'home' in which they were immersed. Forming social ties and entering supportive networks provides the 'structural pull' from pre-involvement to recruitment. Importantly, this process was aided by CasaPound relying upon a wide range of organisational practices, particularly public events (book presentations, sporting events and training sessions; cultural events, political events including but not limited to protests) to drive recruitment, emphasising the importance of face-to-face interaction to support recruitment efforts.

Empirical research on the English Defence League (EDL) (Busher, 2016) also evidences the importance of social ties to the way in which individuals become involved in far-right groups. Those introducing new recruits to the EDL were often part of their social circles and existing social ties facilitated 'bonds of solidarity and intra-group trust' (Busher, 2016: 43). Again, as with CasaPound, the EDL organised a constant supply of political and social events (including street protests, organisational meetings and briefings, 'social' get togethers), to drive mobilisation *and* recruitment. New attendees at an EDL demonstration were personally welcomed and invited to be Facebook friends with more established members and then quickly being made to feel part of their community. Indeed, Facebook played an important role as an organising, mobilising and outreach vehicle (Busher, 2016: 43-4).

Recruitment can also occur through a process of cultivating potential joiners through social influence and the dissemination of extremist propaganda in online and offline contexts. An analysis of the lead up to the El Paso terrorist attack in the US documented the way in which online users radicalise and 'recruit' each other in a 'self-referential continuum of extreme right terrorism' in which anonymous users on online message boards collectively venerate 'saints' and 'martyrs' responsible for previous atrocities and exhort others to join the 'pantheon of heroes' by perpetuating acts of violence 'in exchange for celebrity and respect' (Macklin, 2019). In the Australian context, an analysis of online extremism in New South Wales explores a similar process of social influence through 'red pilling' – 'the preaching, recruitment and mobilisation among the wider public' by those promoting extreme right-wing narratives (Ballsun-Stanton et al., 2020).

With a focus on the Victorian context, Peucker (2021) found that 'many radical-right actors in Australia ... hardly go beyond posting ideological content more or less frequently online, often letting the algorithms of social media platforms do their job of channelling people towards their accounts.' This can create fairly ideologically homogenous online communities where members share a sense of in-group identity and social connections. Victorian research has further demonstrated how certain 'social media-based groups have built a loyal online community over time by posting

primarily on one particular single issue, such as opposition to gender diversity or Islam' (Peucker, 2021b).

Some of these online communities subsequently expand the thematic scope of their posting and move into 'politically and ideologically charged space where far-right narratives circulate' (Peucker et al., 2020: 35). Such shifts are often driven by conspiratorial framing of these themes, creating an internally seemingly coherent meta-narrative. As Peucker notes, 'These ideological shifts may be a reflection of the account administrators' changing ideological mindset, but they can also be part of a recruitment strategy to gradually pull individuals into radical-right ideological spaces' (Peucker, 2021b).

### **3. Online recruitment**

As the terrorism scholar Marc Sageman has observed (2008), the online environment allows for a more distributive organisational structure which has implications for our understanding of online recruitment, one in which a lack or loosening of formal networks, hierarchies and roles online can muddy the distinction between recruiters and recruits, particularly when anonymity is a feature of these interactions (Crosset et al., 2019). Torok (2013) argues that 'the shift towards online forms of recruitment and training has resulted in a corresponding shift ... towards ... a more 'leaderless' structure of terrorist recruitment through embracing digitally rather than spatially located forms of institutional' and social power.

Yet the interactive, communal spaces of the violent extremist digital age are, like their spatial counterparts (Neumann and Rogers, 2007), also 'places of congregation' and 'places of vulnerability' with their own virtual geographies, ranging across platforms, chat forums and channels in which recruitment is not necessarily facilitated by one person, but by multiple voices and influences; for example, the online phenomenon in which potential recruits are 'swarmed' by many group members who respond, provoke, ask and answer questions and share their movement's version of 'truth' (Torok, 2013).

Ponder and Matusitz's (2017) study of online extremist recruitment supports this, using relational development theory to explain how online recruitment achieves its goals through 'initiating, experimenting, intensifying, integrating, and bonding' through interactive online dialogue. Research has also revealed the ways in which the internet can facilitate trust building between individuals, leading to an increase in reciprocation and intimate disclosures (Windsor, 2018).

Aside from playing a role in immersing potential recruits within narratives, ideas and psychosocial support networks, online platforms and the interactive formats they enable are also digital places where recruiters can identify receptive participants in virtual forums and both target and recruit by drawing on various logistical online

capacities relevant to recruitment efforts, such as online registry protocols, directories, FAQ sections and interactive services (Bowman-Grieve, 2013).

None of this is to say, however, that the online environment and its affordances have either replaced or even displaced the importance of offline, face-to-face contact and interactions in recruitment. On the contrary, it is the frequently interactive relationship between online and offline recruitment relationships and dynamics that has led CRIS researchers to create the term ‘crossline’ (Grossman et al., 2021) to connote the interpenetrative nature of these relationships and the places and spaces they can involve.

It is thus particularly important to understand the online environment in relation to recruitment to right-wing extremism, and how this operates in conjunction with offline interaction, particularly in relation to social identity- and community-building. Extremist online spaces are not merely used to disseminate propaganda, but also play a critical social and community building function that draws in recruits seeking belonging, approval and identity stabilisation.

A recent analysis of various recruitment strategies in the Australian far-right (Peucker, 2021b) also points to interplay between online and offline actions pursuing the interwoven aims of (a) disseminating ideological messages (propaganda) and (b) recruitment. Several far-right groups in Victoria and other parts of the country seek to raise their public profile through offline action, such as stickering or leafletting (leaflets often include contact details), holding rallies or other public stunts. This is seen as vehicle to make more people aware of their group and encourage them to follow them online or get in contact with the group directly. Closely related to this recruitment approach is the attempt of attracting mainstream media attention through public provocations; such a deliberate strategy of ‘media baiting’ is regarded a central recruitment tool as media reporting about the group – even if reported critically – significantly helps increase the group’s public profile (Peucker, 2021b).

Leafletting and flyer drop activities are readily observable in Victoria and point to the ubiquitous uptake of these strategies to pursue multiple, interacting channels of influence and propaganda for the purpose of recruitment and mobilisation.

#### **d) Risks to Victoria and especially to Victoria’s multicultural communities**

This section offers a brief discussion of different far-right threats and risks to Victoria, covering three sections: political violence, threats to community safety, and threats to democratic principles and processes.

##### ***Political violence and hate crimes***

Far-right extremism poses a significant threat of political violence in many countries

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around the world, including Australia. The Institute for Economics & Peace *Global Terrorism Index 2020* concluded that ‘in North America, Western Europe, and Oceania, far-right attacks have increased by 250 per cent since 2014, with deaths increasing by 709 per cent over the same period [2014-2019]. There were 89 deaths attributed to far-right terrorists in 2019 [alone]’ (IEP, 2020). Fifty-one of these 89 were killed by an Australian far-right terrorist in the Christchurch mosque attacks in New Zealand – a man who had been active on several Facebook pages of a number of Victorian far-right groups, and who had been invited by one Victorian far-right group to join (an invitation the Christchurch perpetrator declined).

Victoria is also the state where Australia’s anti-terror laws were applied by a court for the first time in a trial against a far-right extremist: Philip Galea was sentenced in late 2019 to 12 years imprisonment for preparing for a terrorist act that would have seen attacks on a socialist centre and a trade union hall in Melbourne, and ‘for attempting to collect or make a document likely to facilitate a terrorist act’ (The Patriot’s Cookbook) with the intention of waging ‘a war against Muslims and leftists’. Galea was associated with several far-right groups active in Victoria in the second half of the 2010s, including one nationalist group established in Melbourne’s west.

This demonstrates that far-right violence and terrorism also pose a significant threat in Victoria. The actual scope of far-right violence is difficult to assess. Given the high legal threshold for classifying an act of violence as a form of terrorism, politically motivated violence is often not recorded under the terrorism category. Far-right hatred and violence towards certain ethno-religious minorities, gender-diverse groups or others considered ‘political enemies’ may fall under the label of hate crimes. As Mills and colleagues (2015) argued, far-right extremist violence and hate crimes are ‘more akin to close cousins than distant relatives.’ The lines between both are often blurry and hard to draw. Victoria Police records hate crimes as ‘prejudice-motivated crimes’; however, it is widely acknowledged that, for various reasons, hate crimes are severely underreported and under-recorded. This suggests that violent crimes, targeting certain parts of Victoria’s community and committed (partially or fully) motivated by a hateful far-right ideology, may often not be recorded as such, which means the scope of far-right violence appears to be significantly underestimated. In Victoria, several far-right extremist figures have engaged in violent conduct in recent times, but the potentially or likely political motivational dimensions of these acts seemed to not have been fully considered and acknowledged.

CRIS research on far-right communities and messaging on Facebook, Twitter and Gab has found high direct calls for violence as well as high levels of what Simi and Windisch (2020) refer to as ‘violent talk’: ‘messaging that cultivates, normalizes and reinforces hatred, dehumanization and aggressive hostility toward minority groups and the “political enemy”’ (Peucker, 2021). According to Simi and Windisch (2020: 2), ‘the effects of violent talk are indeterminate’. They argue that, on the one hand, it may be a verbal substitute for violent behaviour, but, on the other hand,

Violent talk helps enculturate individuals through socialization processes by communicating values and norms. In turn, these values and norms are part of a process where in-group and out-group boundaries are established, potential targets for violence are identified and dehumanized, violent tactics are shared, and violent individuals and groups are designated as sacred.... In short, violent talk clearly plays an important role in terms of fomenting actual violence. (Simi and Windisch, 2020: 11)

### ***Community safety and cohesion***

‘Violent talk’ within far-right milieus can affect the everyday lives of many Victorians. It can promote and encourage actual violence against communities and groups that are commonly portrayed and targeted by the far-right as their enemies – from ethnic or religious minority groups (e.g. members of the Muslim or Jewish community; people of colour) and people with gender-diverse identities to government representatives or other politicians. But far-right messaging and actions tends to also negatively impact on many communities in Victoria even where these actions are not (yet) violent. Many in these targeted communities experience the threat of violence which can affect their sense of safety, sense of belonging as well as community relations, trust and cohesion. The president of the Islamic Council of Victoria, Adel Salman, recently expressed community concerns about far-right ideologies and hatred: ‘Muslims feel threatened. We don’t have to look back to the very tragic events in Christchurch to see what the results of that hatred can be’ (Zwartz, 2021). This is confirmed by the findings of a large-scale survey among Muslims according to which 93% of Muslim respondents express concerns about right-wing extremism (Rane et al., 2020).

Even non-violent far-right actions can affect perceptions of community safety and, as a result, everyday life of people from targeted communities, as a Victoria University study found (Peucker et al., 2021). During the Bendigo mosque conflict (even before the largescale protests involving several far-right groups), for example, some members of the local Muslim community felt so unsafe that they would no longer leave the house alone or after dark.

These severe safety concerns among many members of targeted communities are often ignored in the public debate about, and official threat assessment of, far-right extremism in Victoria and Australia more broadly. What adds to this community safety threat is the ability of far-right actors and networks to ‘exert disproportioned levels of agenda-setting power’ in the public debate (Grossman et al., 2016: 27), which is often helped by media reporting on far-right groups, actions and narratives, in effect platforming and unintentionally amplifying far-right tropes. Bail (2012: 856), for example, found in his US study that anti-Muslim fringe organisations ‘not only permeated the mainstream but also forged vast social networks that consolidated their capacity to create cultural change.’

The mainstreaming of far-right tropes that had previously been largely confined to extreme ideological fringes has also occurred in Australia. Some of the examples are the discussion around banning Muslim immigration (e.g. Sonia Kruger's on-air comments and subsequent opinion polls), the white supremacy slogan 'It's okay to be white' (traveling from white supremacy forums via Lauren Southern into the Australian Senate), or the debate around prioritizing visa for white South African farmers. Such mainstreaming contributes to shifting social norms of legitimate discourse, with the likely potential of fueling social division, legitimising and increasing the appeal of far-right narratives (and subsequently recruitment opportunities), and further diminishing community safety in particular among Victoria's multicultural and multifaith communities.

### ***Threats to democracy***

Finally, the far-right also poses a threat to democracy – a threat that is often overlooked in the Australian discussion about extremism. There are several interconnected ideological, behavioral and social dimensions to this threat.

First, as outlined above, an explicit anti-democratic agenda is an inherent part of many extreme far-right **ideologies**; the ultimate goal of many far-right extremist groups and networks is to overthrow a democratic system (or accelerate processes leading to its collapse) and replace it by an authoritarian ethno-nationalist regime. Second, and related to this, far-right extremist groups, including in Victoria, position themselves in explicit opposition to liberal democratic principle of equality and egalitarianism. A recent Macquarie University (Ballsun-Stanton et al., 2020: 2) study argues that far-right extremism 'challenge[s] the fundamentals of pluralist liberal democracy through exclusivist appeals to race, ethnicity, nation, and gender'. Third, the threat to democracy goes beyond the far-right extremists' opposition to democratic principles as concrete far-right **actions** that can also pose a threat to democratic processes. A recent Victoria University study (Peucker et al., 2020) concluded that far-right mobilisation in the local context can intimidate democratically elected representatives in government and thus illegitimately influence democratic decision-making processes. Fourth, far-right milieus and networks create ideologically defined **in-group** spaces that offer members a sense of community and connectedness, both online and offline. Those within these far-right spaces not only express opposition to democratic principles, they also fundamentally reject democratic processes, displaying 'a level of hostility to democratic conventions and institutions that in general exceeds ... even the most permissive notion of an "agonistic" public sphere' (Davis, 2021: 144). In the process, they become 'anti-publics' (Davis, 2019) environments in which critical democratic engagement and deliberation is invalidated.

### **f) Links between far-right extremist groups, other forms of extremism, and populist radical right and anti-vaccine misinformation groups**

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In addition to ushering in an era of increased internet dominance, the pandemic has deepened existing inequalities, and with them vulnerabilities to novel kinds of social influence in an environment of heightened sense of grievance. Combined with the multimodal affordances of internet platforms, this has hastened the targeted 'sale' of different brands of social division (Dexter et al., 2021). Their appeal rests in offering simple solutions to a highly complex set of problems or in identifying a ready-made scapegoat. They have also appealed to the need for belonging in ways that, rather than promoting solidarity across different groups experiencing common challenges, have instead focused on creating and profiting from antagonistic communities.

Perceptions in some sectors of the Victorian population, as elsewhere, that public health measures implemented in response to the pandemic are authoritarian have been accompanied by a parallel growth in conspiracy-oriented ideologies, which have infiltrated unexpected demographics (Kelly, 2020). In particular, the introduction of the QAnon conspiracy – a divisive social movement advocating resistance to so-called 'global elites', seen as manipulating populations for their own ends – into wellness communities through prominent lifestyle influencers has led some to radicalise on 'conspiritual' (i.e., the intersection of conspiracy and spirituality) trajectories of militancy (Beres et al., 2020; Khalil, 2020), including recruitment into violent extremism.

In this sense, the COVID-19 pandemic has enabled extremist actors to mobilise and recruit (Grossman, 2021a) within diverse demographics. As in other democracies that have imposed vaccine mandates, recent demonstrations in Australia, including Victoria, have included anti-democratic extremists seeking to capitalise on pandemic-induced grievances, with government and public health officials' lives threatened (Hunter, 2021; McKenzie and Lucas, 2021; Mason, 2021; Roose, 2021). Healthcare workers, vaccination centres and ordinary citizens complying with public health orders also became targets of hate (Kelly, 2021; Karvelas, 2021).

Such incidents highlight the deleterious social consequences of the turn toward militancy on the part of a cohort of conspiritual, far-right and wellness activists. While the targeted violence displayed in their behaviour is specific to the context of the pandemic, it is not unique in its antagonistic impulse to define, attack and remove an enemy, an impulse shared by all exclusivist violent groups, and one that threatens democracy.

That the activists themselves claim to be dissenting in defence of their freedoms is critical (Beres 2021). Their claim highlights deeply felt grievances that result from coronavirus-driven restrictions. Within the Australian context, this conducive environment of grievances arguably peaked during Melbourne's third extended lockdown in 2021. It was described by many as the city's breaking point. Unlike the rest of Australia, Melbourne had a uniquely long lockdown in 2020 that lasted from July until October of that year. Whilst this lockdown proved damaging to mental health

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and livelihoods, it nevertheless produced the desired outcome of zero COVID cases, freeing the city to reopen once the lockdown had ended. During the 2021 lockdown, by contrast, many in the community were already at breaking point both financially and psychologically without the economic support experienced for closed businesses in the form of the Australian Commonwealth government's Jobkeeper and Jobseeker schemes that protected livelihoods and people from poverty in 2020.

When vaccine mandates were introduced by the Victorian government in the middle of this third long lockdown, the conducive environment of grievances peaked. The absence of supports and increased strain on the community increased the vulnerability of some to the influence of alternative health and far right influences who appeared to be listening to community concerns about the impact of long lockdowns and vaccine mandates, producing an intersection of social influence and grievance that led many to join encrypted messaging applications where they could find solace in likeminded cohorts around the world and priming some of the city's inhabitants for civil unrest.

Combined with the closure of particular industries (such as construction) exempted from some restrictions during earlier stages of the pandemic, and the introduction of vaccine mandates, there was little to keep the anger of some of the city's inhabitants off the streets. Represented in the media as 'Neo-Nazi' demonstrations aligned with the far-right, these demonstrations served as recruitment grounds for disgruntled members of the community, putting many in touch, for the first time, with far-right agendas and organisations. The fact that much of the media reported the demonstrations as being uniformly sympathetic to Neo-Nazi ideology only served to enhance far right groups' notoriety and prominence within the mainstream (Brown, K. et al., 2021; Thomas, 2021) and red pill 'pipeline' from vaccine hesitancy and anger over lockdowns to sympathy for or adherence to conspiracy and militancy.

Since the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, a host of Victorians from a diverse range of backgrounds, have adopted conspiracy thinking and mobilised to profit from anti-authoritarian views that encourage rejection of public health responses. More recently, the polarisation of people into pro- and anti-vax camps has served to further divide communities at a critical time of pandemic recovery (Doige, 2021). The assumption that those against vaccine mandates are all anti-vaxxers (Gibson and Perera, 2021) or alt-right extremists obscures the nuances of who avoids COVID vaccines and why (Tufekci, 2021). At worst, this notion risks pushing the vaccine-hesitant toward bad-faith actors and far-right extremist recruiters who welcome their legitimate concerns as an opportunity for political traction (Karp and Martin, 2021).

### **g) Countering far-right extremist groups and their influence in Victoria**



i. **Early intervention measures to diminish the recruitment and mobilisation prospects of far-right extremist groups**

The role of early intervention measures to diminish the recruitment and mobilisation prospects of far-right extremist groups is critical. These early intervention measures need to be developed and implemented at both state and community levels. 'Early intervention' is often understood as equivalent to *prevention* of or *resilience to* violent extremism (Grossman, 2021b; Grossman et al., 2020; Ellis and Abdi, 2017), but in fact it can embrace one or both of two stages in radicalisation trajectories: *prevention* of the uptake of violent extremism, and *diversion* of those who have already begun to travel some distance down a radicalised pathway.

At the **prevention** stage, the following elements are important considerations for both state and communities. **The state** needs to have clearly articulated and well-designed resources spanning communication, education and social service supports that can reach those who are vulnerable to far-right messaging and recruitment. These resources need to include both 'for' and 'against' messaging and supports. Fostering the ability to help people navigate toward the resources they need to thrive when facing various forms of adversity – a key hallmark of resilience (Ungar, 2010; Grossman, 2021b) – is essential in prevention work that focuses on building resilience to the social harms of far-right extremist narratives that seek to promote victimhood and grievance rather than coping and thriving skills in a disenchanting and/or disadvantaged population cohort. **Communities** also need to develop local resources, including education, awareness and support networks that can reach into local councils, schools, recreational organisations, families and social networks to influence and connect people to positive resilience resources on the ground.

At the **diversion** stage, **the state and communities** need to partner to develop *clear, meaningful and sustainable* referral and disengagement mechanisms for those who may already be mobilising to far-right extremism. Diversion pathways may include, but should definitely not be limited to, the role of law enforcement programs; the role of social support systems including social work and mental health providers should be vigorously encouraged and resourced to develop disengagement and referral expertise at local community level through partnerships with government. Diversion (as part of 'early intervention') should ideally occur at the pre-criminal threshold, meaning the role of law enforcement would ideally be limited at this point.

Both the state and communities need to develop or build on a suite of what may be called '**for**' (**pro-social**) and '**against**' (**challenge-based**) resources to help combat recruitment and mobilisation to far-right extremism. These resources are discussed in further detail below.

**'For' resources by the state and communities**

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'For' resources include positive messaging and education campaigns and materials that promote acceptance, engagement and meaningful exchange with people from different racial, ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds. Such engagement and exchange cannot merely be messaged about, however: structural opportunities supported by the state, in particular at grassroots community level (e.g. through local councils, sporting clubs, cultural events and community organisations and networks) are vital if the messaging is to be effectively supported. Given the prevalence of online engagement and interaction, the state needs to think creatively about how to leverage social media and digital products that are locally produced by communities; while states may resource these, research has shown that direct government-based CVE counter-messaging can have limited effectiveness and indeed can provide a focal point of resistance and subversion for far-right and other violent extremist groups (Waldman and Verga, 2016).

In relation to education, schools already have strong 'for' resources embedded in the Victorian curriculum. However, there is an important role for extra-curricular community education and awareness resources that reinforce this learning for both young people and others in Victorian communities. Much of what is promoted in schools can be undermined, contested or undone beyond school environments through alternative social networks. Closing the loop between formal educational strategies and community-based education and awareness resources is therefore vital.

In this regard, the AMF's Building Community Resilience Training and subsequent Community Awareness Training eLearning Module (<https://amf.net.au/entry/community-awareness-training-manual-elearning-module/>) is one example of such a resource. These resources, and the program logic that underpins them, aim to build resilience in communities against all kinds of anti-social behaviour and promote social cohesion through education and community awareness. The AMF model is not specific to any one particular national, political, religious or ideological group and applies regardless of ideology or motivation to radicalisation. The Building Community Resilience Training was designed to deliver knowledge, understanding and skills, to a targeted audience of community, government and religious leaders about recognising anti-social behaviours, including criminality, and processes that can lead to violent extremism, along with prevention strategies and where to go for support. The subsequent eLearning module was developed from these training experiences to provide open access to the broader community to generate awareness of possible changes in the behaviour of family members, friends, colleagues and others in the community.

Finally, the state needs to ensure that social services addressing the needs of people experiencing disadvantage – in contexts of employment, mental health, social isolation and sense of belonging (including sense of being 'left behind') are both easily available and consistently meaningful for those who draw on them. This is particularly important

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in regional and rural areas, and consideration should be given to a ‘whole of Victoria’ mapping of resource distribution that moves beyond privileging urban/metropolitan resource concentration, especially given both the rise of far-right extremism and compounding economic and social disadvantage in various regional and rural areas relative to metropolitan centres.

For **communities**, the focus needs to be on taking the lead, through grassroots networks and organisations, in promoting local awareness around the ways in which far-right extremist groups and narratives seek to recruit and mobilise those who may be vulnerable to their messaging and ideology. Far-right extremist recruitment can be insidious, targeting those who need to belong, feel a sense of social approval, are struggling with identity and who feel relatively powerless to effect positive change in their lives. This is particularly the case for young people who may lack access to or understanding of resources that would help them cope and thrive.

As noted above, far-right extremists recruit both online and offline, fostering sense of grievance and victimisation. Communities have a critical role to play in countering these narratives, both through structural and social support, but also through directly voicing their opposition to such narratives. They also have a vital role to play in developing awareness mechanisms and networks that can identify early signs of radicalisation to far-right extremist ideology, and in setting up local channels for referral and support to enhance early intervention. These mechanisms – voicing opposition, identifying early indicators of radicalisation, and referrals for support and intervention – have often been seen as the purview of government alone. This occludes the very substantial knowledge and input that can be harnessed amongst local community actors, and every effort should be made to work with communities to lead on, rather than merely follow, government templates for how to identify and respond to emerging cases of radicalisation to far-right extremism.

***‘Against resources’ for the state and communities***

Turning to ‘against’ resources, **the state** needs to redouble its efforts in developing and disseminating anti-racism, anti-violence and anti-discrimination messaging. The state needs to be seen to be unequivocal in its support for multiculturalism and for the community strengthening benefits of cultural diversity for both Victoria and the nation. Far-right extremism thrives on vigorous and creative campaigns of opposition, and the state must meet these head-on with equally vigorous opposition campaigns that reject and negate the claims of far-right extremist narratives that seek to divide and sow disharmony. Indispensable to this effort is consistently undermining the grievances promoted by far-right extremists (for example, that immigrants ‘steal’ jobs from mainstream communities) through evidence-based narratives.

However, in the current climate of conspiracy-oriented discourse, in which evidence is quickly or routinely dismissed by conspiracists as part of the ‘global elite’s’ effort to hoodwink the general population, evidence-based rebuttals may not be enough.

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‘Against’ resources must therefore also include development of anti-conspiracy narratives that help unpick the holes in conspiracist thinking, but that also offer alternative ways of understanding the dynamics of the society and world we live in and the challenges that we face.

Some research suggests that ‘pre-bunking’ or ‘inoculation’ (Braddock, 2022 [2019]) to promote resistance to persuasion by extremist propaganda, including conspiracist thinking, can be effective; however, in the current environment, such pre-bunking is more likely to work for younger populations whose views have not yet solidified. For adults who are drawn to conspiracist thinking, direct confrontation or dismissal of their ideas and beliefs is not useful, particularly by the state; instead, government needs to think about how to consistently demonstrate its trustworthiness and transparency. In this regard, an **Integrity Charter** for the Victorian government, similar in nature to Victoria’s Human Rights Charter, could be a helpful tool.

The best ‘against’ resource possessed by **communities** is the ability to exercise positive, prosocial social influence through family, kinship and peer networks, and to step up and call out supremacist, racist, violent and discriminatory narratives and behaviours, both online and offline. Again, supporting communities to lead on developing local resources that empower positive bystander activism is critical. Initiatives and toolkits for positive bystander activism already exist in other contexts (for example, the online active bystander project of Gender Equity Victoria [Online Active Bystander Project | Gender Equity Victoria \(genvic.org.au\)](https://genvic.org.au), or the Women’s Health Loddon Mallee *Introduction to Bystander Action* program, [Being an Active Bystander – Sunbury and Cobaw Community Health \(sunburycobaw.org.au\)](https://sunburycobaw.org.au)) that could usefully be consulted to design positive bystander activism campaigns directed toward far-right extremism.

Taken together, these resources – ‘for’ and ‘against’, led and implemented by both the state and communities – address and build on the five factors shown to be meaningful in building resilience to violent extremism, particularly amongst young people (Grossman et al., 2020): cultural identity and connectedness; bridging capital; linking capital; violence-related behaviour, and violence related beliefs.

**ii. The role of social cohesion, greater civil engagement, empowerment, and community building programs**

Extreme right groups that espouse national socialism, white supremacy and hatred and violence toward ethnically, religiously and/or culturally different ‘others’ actively seek to denigrate and undermine Australian democratic, egalitarian and multicultural values through their actions and rhetoric, as well as undermine government legitimacy and authority. They advocate for alternative societies and governance structures to replace democracy. They also cultivate a narrow understanding of their ‘in group’ and

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denigrate those in their 'out group,' adopting strategies and positions that foster division and confrontation (Berger, 2018).

As a nation Australia has long recognised the value of efforts to strengthen social cohesion as an essential pillar in its approach to countering violent extremism across all ideological platforms, as well as for the benefit of society more generally. Australian CVE policy has also long drawn a clear distinction between 'extremism' and 'violent extremism', making clear that the Government does not want to interfere with people's rights to hold various beliefs, but will intervene if those beliefs support or lead to acts of violence against individuals, communities and society at large or jeopardise national security and community safety and wellbeing.<sup>135</sup>

However, we face today new risks to social cohesion that can threaten our long track record of investing in and benefitting from this critical element of national wellbeing and resilience to the social and political harms of radicalised violence. Long-term investment in social cohesion initiatives is crucial in securing national safety and wellbeing: not only because stronger cohesion leads to a stronger sense of belonging and inclusion, making citizens more resilient to the appeals of violent extremist narratives that try to undermine national belonging, but also because it sends a clear message that government is interested in the overall welfare of communities, rather than in focusing simply on addressing the potential risks they may pose to national security (Tahiri and Grossman, 2013; Ellis and Abdi, 2017).

The need to reinforce social cohesion has become even more urgent given the range of threats now posed to social cohesion by far-right extremist ideologies, groups and narratives. Racism continues to be a major challenge to social cohesion, with a 'surprisingly big shift' in the number of Australians identifying racism in the 2021 Scanlon Survey as a 'very big' or 'fairly big' problem in Australia today – at 60% of respondents, this reflects a rise of 20% from the 40% who identified this as an issue in 2020 (Markus, 2021), despite other evidence from the same survey suggesting that 'proponents of racist and xenophobic views are a shrinking segment of the population', with decreases in anti-Muslim sentiment also evident (from 40% in 2019 to 32% in mid-2021):

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<sup>135</sup> <https://www.livingsafetogether.gov.au/get-the-facts>

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**Table 39** 'Is your personal attitude positive, negative or neutral towards ... [faith group]?', Response: 'very negative' and 'somewhat negative', 2017-21 (percentage, LinA)

FAITH GROUP	2017	2018	2019	JUL 2020	NOV 2020	JUL 2021
Buddhist	6	7	6	5	4	4
Jewish	--	--	--	9	9	9
Christian	12	12	14	11	12	13
Hindu	--	--	10	12	12	10
Sikh	--	--	--	13	14	12
Muslim	41	39	40	37	35	32

\*Change between November 2020 and July 2021 not significant at  $p < .05$

Source: Markus, A. (2021) *Mapping Social Cohesion Report 2021*

However, we have also seen new social cohesion threats emerge. Preeminent amongst these is the sharply accelerating rise of **conspiracy theories, misinformation, anti-government sentiment and right-wing extremist online and offline activity**. While all these features have already been present in Australian communities to some degree, particularly in online environments, their escalation and their potential to damage hard-won gains in social cohesion and social capital calls for further action.

Conspiracy theories, including those aligned to right-wing extremist narratives, continue in 2022 to make headway in eroding trust in government institutions, laws and support systems. This has been readily apparent during the COVID pandemic, as we discuss in further detail below, but it is by no means limited to uncertainty or trust issues regarding public health management; it extends to a view that all authorities, institutions, leaders and communication are to be treated as against, rather than for, the interests and benefits of ordinary citizens. This is particularly evident in relation to the rise of the sovereign citizen movement in Australia – frequently though not exclusively allied to far-right extremist frameworks – which ‘rejects the legitimacy of the state’ (Khalil, 2021) and found renewed impetus through the emergency restrictions taken during the Covid lockdowns of 2020 and 2021 to develop alongside far-right and conspiracist groups ‘a level of coordination and coherence by coalescing around the idea of oppressive governments’ (Westendorf, 2021).

The consistent extent to which conspiracy theories, misinformation and anti-government sentiment seek to delegitimise government directly erodes social cohesion by sowing doubt about the ability of governments to manage and regulate in the interests of all Australians. From this, it is a relatively short step to creating and enhancing social divisions that pit one group’s interests against another’s, promoting an environment in which social conflict becomes the norm and not the exception, and with dire consequences for civil harmony and cooperation in a multicultural pluralist society.

Far-right rhetoric intersects with conspiracist narratives in a number of ways that help advance doctrines focused on the supremacy of 'white' ethnic and racial groups and the purported threat to the 'Australian' way of life they claim is posed by minority ethnic and racial groups. One example of this intersection is the so-called Great Replacement theory, which casts minority population immigration and reproductive rates as a deliberate driver for the elimination of European background peoples, and the demonisation of particular ethnic, religious and cultural groups (including Jews, Muslims, African-Australians, Indigenous Australians and Asian-Australians) as unworthy of citizenship and full participation in a 'European'-background country like Australia.

The impact of conspiracy-inflected doctrines like the Great Replacement Theory, and the hateful rhetoric through which they are disseminated and promoted, has the potential to severely undermine Australia's social cohesion. It is not enough to dismiss such groups, and the narratives they espouse, as 'fringe' or 'lunatic' elements of society. The motivations driving conspiracy adherents' trajectories of radicalisation are both highly complex and context-dependent, requiring detailed and critically empathetic analysis of the narratives, networks and nuances that inform their pathways into militant radicalisation (Gerrand, 2020; Kruglanski et al., 2019; McAleer, 2019).

Regardless of the actual numbers of individuals who are committed adherents to such doctrines, the amplification of such views through social media and also traditional media reportage has the capacity to instil fear, alienation and disengagement by Australian minority communities who are explicitly targeted and attacked by such rhetoric. If such experiences are compounded by perceptions that government and mainstream communities are doing little to robustly counter such narratives and actively promote the social cohesion and inclusiveness on which our national wellbeing depends, a risk then emerges that they will be vulnerable to narratives that emphasise self-reliance and self-defence against such attacks, which can in turn lead a minority to radicalise to their own extreme positions, including positions that advocate the use of violence.

### ***Responses to misinformation and disinformation that empower communities***

One response to this is to develop and disseminate alternative narratives that both diminish the recruitment and mobilisation prospects of far-right recruiters, and foster greater social cohesion, civil engagement and empowerment. A recent rapid evidence assessment of alternative narratives undertaken for the AVERT network (Roose et al., [2021](#)) found that such narratives can directly address root causes such as real and perceived grievances as well as the psycho-social needs that may lead to engagement with extremist discourse.

Alternative narratives can acknowledge the 'kernel of truth' in extremist narratives (for

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example, legitimate grievances or concerns about the exercise of power or perceived injustices) where these exist. They have credible messages and messengers (RAN, 2015: 6), aim to redirect rather than ‘deradicalise’, are context-specific, stand *for* rather than *against* something, are grassroots rather than top-down, and empower by engaging audiences as active agents. Online, such narratives ideally feature sophisticated multimodal content/representation practices - videos, memes, music, and online posts which can convey alternative messages to those deployed by extremist influences that meet people where they are at (Gerrand, 2022). For this reason, they work at the level of affect and imagination (Appadurai, 1990).

They may be created or co-created with the target audience, promote ambiguity and agonism (good conflict), inspire critical thinking, are tailored to both online and offline settings, and work to shift people’s thinking from ‘us and them’ to ‘we’ (Gerrand, 2022; Grossman, 2014). Above all, they move audiences from ‘either/or’ black and white thinking to ‘both/and’ appreciation of complexity. Such narratives can target ‘fence-sitters’, are not explicitly C/PVE and complement and contribute to structural change (Gerrand, 2022; Roose et al., 2021).

Whilst these creative, grassroots alternative narrative approaches can be highly effective at engaging with people who are at risk of or have been exposed to extremist content, the conducive environment of push factors including COVID-19 and the algorithmic design of social media platforms present formidable challenges for practitioners to amplify such alternative pro-social narratives. This is in part because social cohesion requires not only bonding and bridging capital (connecting with and supporting those who are like us and those who are different to us), but also *vertical* or *linking* capital – maintaining connection, confidence and trust in authorities and public institutions that have broad social power and capacity to influence and strengthen social wellbeing. The erosion of linking capital through conspiracy theory and anti-government sentiment and rhetoric, and the commensurate fragmentation of social cohesion, provides a ready environment in which vulnerable individuals and groups may feel the need to turn away from government toward alternative sources of support, including that offered by groups that seek to exploit such sentiments for violent extremist recruitment.

In this context, it is especially important to acknowledge that working partnerships between governments and civil society hold the key to preventing the rise of violent extremism in Australia through effective social cohesion efforts. The rise of the far-right, particularly as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, has meant the prevention of violent extremism becomes more than just the challenging of racist narratives, combatting hate speech, and the strengthening of respectful attitudes, cultural diversity, and coexistence. The task of preventing far-right extremism can at times require an effort to directly confront and disturb the creation and distribution of misinformation.



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These efforts require the leveraging of existing grassroots relationships, the cooperation of tech companies, and improved collaborative efforts between the State, Territory, and Commonwealth governments. The focus of these efforts should be on disrupting, deconstructing, and delegitimising information that lacks credibility and seeks to stoke fear, confusion, or distrust, targeting both low and high-risk social media platforms. This approach aims to disrupt the spread of extremist content and information consumed by mainstream society, decreasing the capacity for widespread sympathy for extremist causes.

The experience of the Australian Multicultural Foundation, a CRIS Consortium partner, with community programs conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic highlights the role of misinformation and conspiracy theories in sowing discord and division in community groups, religious and broader. Claims of vaccination side effects, COVID-19 misinformation and other inflammatory rhetoric have been used by conspiracy theorists and far-right extremist groups to further alienate and isolate individuals from various diverse communities. AMF programs designed to counter the spread of misinformation and increase vaccination uptake and community confidence in official health messages played an important role in social cohesion amongst culturally and linguistically diverse communities in Victoria.

Efforts by civil organisations to build cohesive messaging and methods for promoting active information dissemination will serve to reduce the influence of far-right extremist groups currently influencing hesitant or susceptible individuals. These efforts would complement ongoing prevention efforts relating to other forms of harmful extremism and seek to curb further rationale or justification by individuals and organisations to react to the antagonistic presence of the far-right.

During the height of COVID-19 misinformation and anti-government sentiment, fuelled by the far-right, grassroots communications programs, co-designed with the community, aimed to build the bridges of trust between the community and various Australian governments, including the Victorian government. These messaging campaigns involved community and religious leaders, deliberately targeting those who felt otherwise marginalised and isolated by Australian Governments in their COVID-19 messaging. Hearing important messaging from familiar voices on a range of topics from COVID-19 safe behaviours to vaccination information served to promote informed messaging and increase audience retention. Consequently, far-right extremist movements have found it increasingly difficult to gain influence in communities where trust has been restored.

### **Concluding remarks**

Based on the discussion above, policymakers need to consider the following in developing responses to the threats to social cohesion posed in particular by the intersection of conspiracy and its leveraging by far-right extremist groups (Grossman,

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2021a; Braddock, 2022):

1. The role that conspiratorial thinking plays in processes of far-right radicalisation
2. The emergence of conspiracist movements as far-right extremist actors, and the exploitation by far-right extremist actors of conspiracist individuals and networks
3. The effectiveness of inoculation and pre-bunking strategies for developing resilience to far-right extremist and conspiracist narratives

Policy settings in this regard also need to address:

1. The post-truth environment in which far-right extremist narratives flourish
2. The economic inequalities that fuel the potency of far-right extremist thinking and propaganda
3. The social divisions that nurture its platforms
4. The technological affordances that drive its dissemination, and the ways in which these can be re-harnessed for pro-social messaging
5. The fabrication of 'threat' environments in which minority groups are targeted on the basis of their racial, ethnic, cultural, gender, sexual or religious status
6. The prevalence of far-right extremists' strategic grievance- and victimhood-led narratives seeking to undermine social cohesion
7. The importance of legitimate channels for bringing forward and addressing genuine grievances and instances of victimisation

These policy considerations also highlight the importance, as noted in the CRIS submission to the PJCIS Inquiry into Extremist Movements and Radicalism in Australia (Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies, 2021) of the continued investment by Australia in the connection between *social cohesion* and *community resilience*. Resilience in the context of violent extremism is focused primarily on the capacity to *resist* the appeal of violent extremism promoted by ideological, political or religious groups, as well as the capacity to *recover* from terrorist incidents that cause harm to our communities (Grossman, 2021b; Ellis and Abdi, 2017).

Without sufficient levels of social cohesion, community resilience is significantly weakened, because our capacity to adapt, support, learn, and develop and distribute resources to meaningfully address problems or challenges relating to ideologically motivated violence is reliant on the social cohesion and associated social capital that underpins such efforts. For example, in an environment of weakened social cohesion, particularly in relation to lack of trust in government institutions, we will see lower or untimely reporting to authorities by family members and friends who may have intimate knowledge of someone who is radicalising to violence, losing precious opportunities for meaningful early intervention as a result (Grossman 2015, 2018; Thomas et al.

2020).

Some critics have argued that social cohesion can have only an 'indirect relationship' to preventing extremist violence, whereas acts of extremist violence have a 'measurable impact on social cohesion' needs to be accounted for in policy and programming contexts (Lauland et al., 2019: 23). These remain current issues in the contemporary landscape of efforts to prevent and counter violent extremism, and renewed attention must be given to showing that Australian policy and programs are, in practice as well as in name, 'agnostic' in relation both to the ideological spectrum of threats and to the critically important role of both governments and *all* communities in contributing toward efforts to limit the appeal and take-up of socially divisive hateful and violent extremist narratives.

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